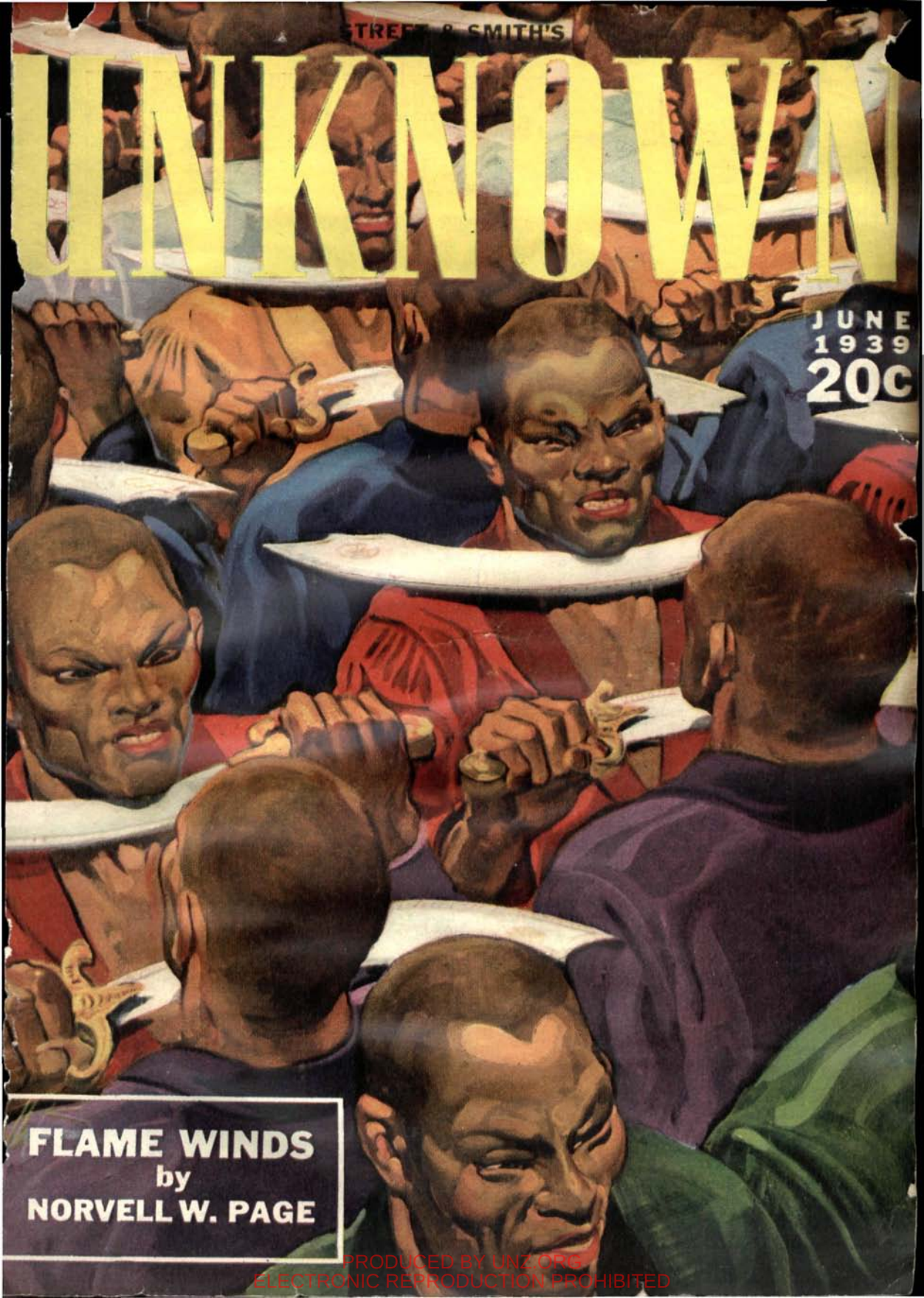

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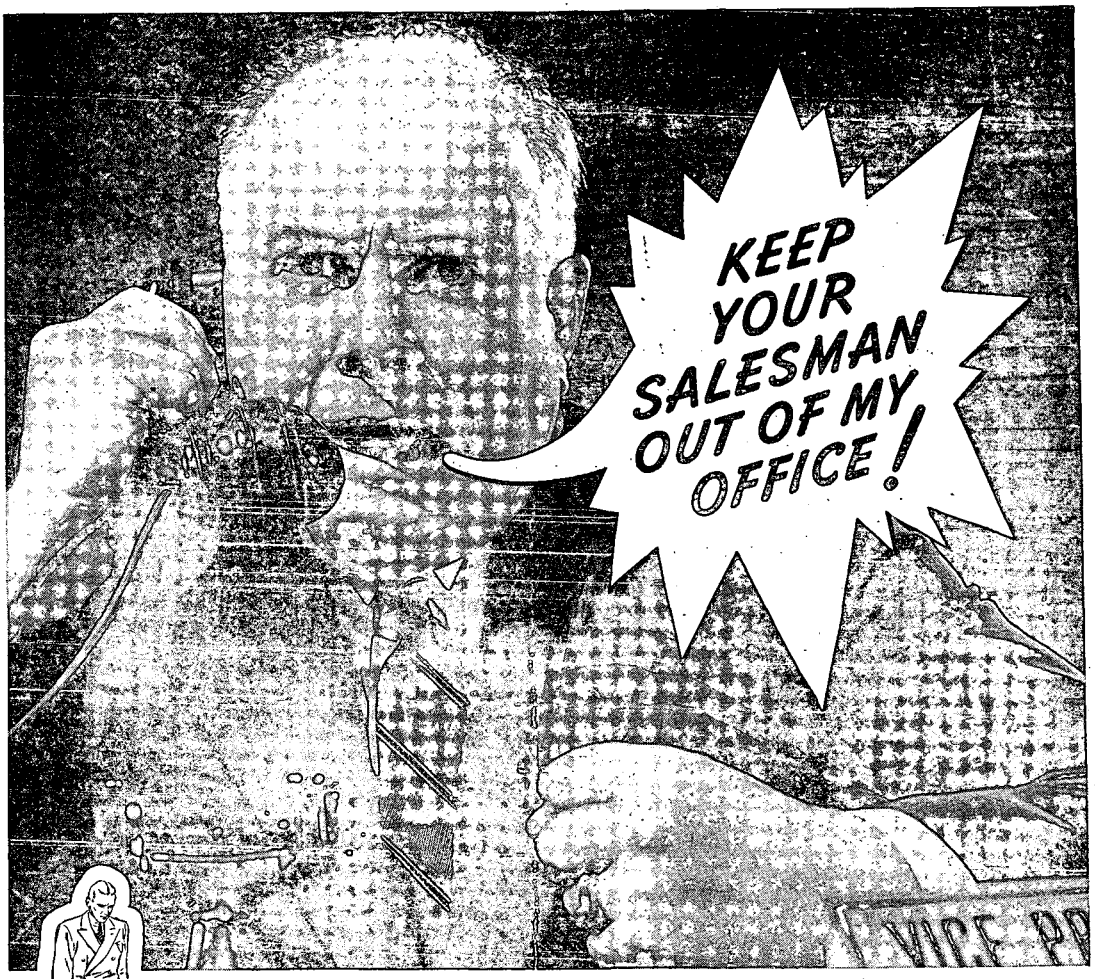

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Don't think that you are the exception to halitosis; everyone is apt to have it at some time or other, *without realizing it*. It may be here today and absent tomorrow. Bad teeth, bridgework, and dental plates may be contributing causes.

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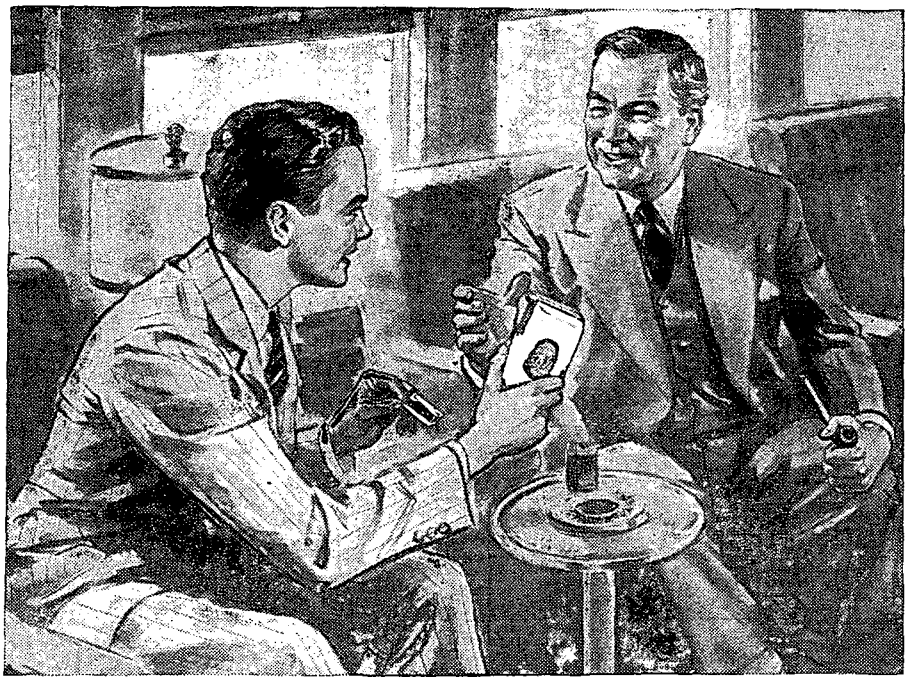

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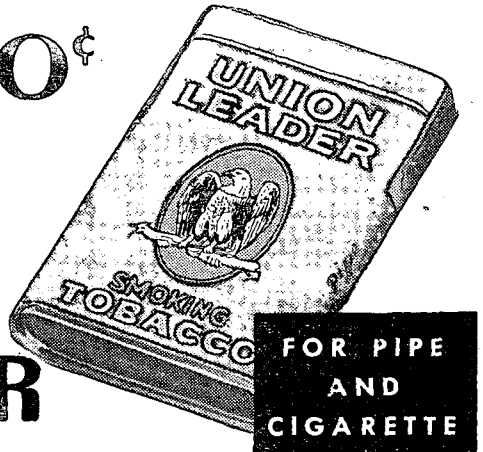

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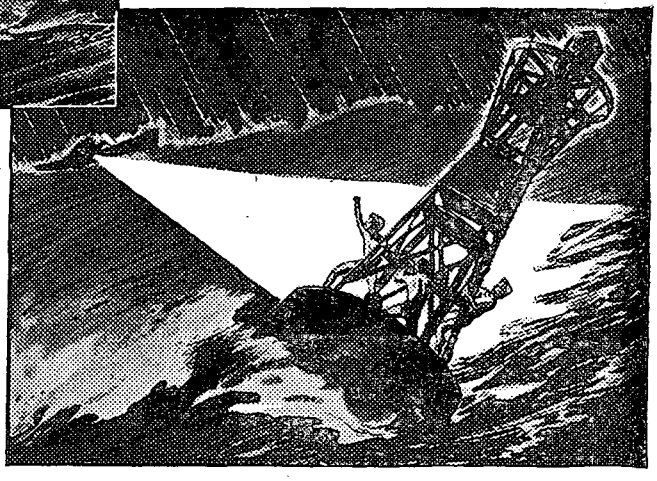
CLINGING FOR THEIR LIVES TO A ROCKING BUOY

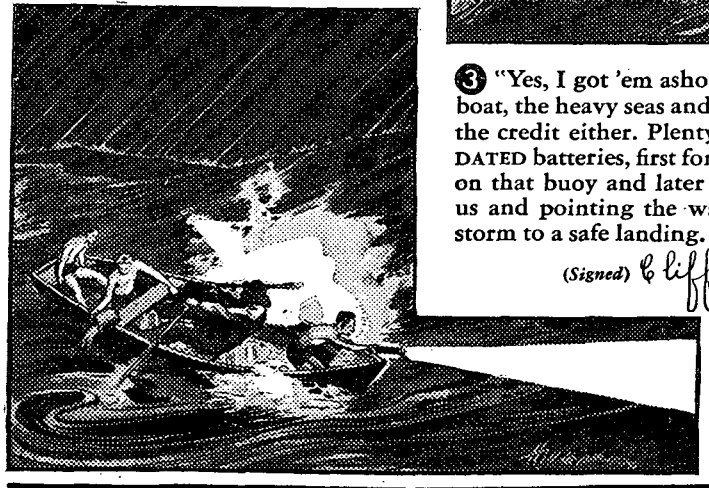
CLIFFORD THORNE, noted Detroit lifeguard, famous for more than 1,000 rescues.

...CLIFFORD THORNE ADDS THREE MORE TO RECORD OF 1000 RESCUES

❶ "I stayed out on Lake St. Claire until well after dark fishing," writes Clifford Thorne of 716 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich. "As I started rowing home a terrific squall hit. Rowing was almost impossible and the rain was so heavy it blotted out lights half a mile away. And then, over the howl of the wind I thought I heard cries for help.



❷ "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... *and there they were!* Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.



❸ "Yes, I got 'em ashore safely, in spite of an overloaded boat, the heavy seas and the heavy rain, and I can't take all the credit either. Plenty of it belongs to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, first for finding the lads on that buoy and later for standing by us and pointing the way through that storm to a safe landing.

(Signed) Clifford Thorne"

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OF THINGS BEYOND

The July UNKNOWN brings L. Ron Hubbard's second novel—a full book-length adventure of a modern man in the land of the jinn. The Bible tells that Solomon was the wisest of men, but if you read it again you will find that the Bible makes, but does not illustrate this statement; it shows very few instances of Solomon's great wisdom.

But Solomon was a great man in the tales of the Arabs, and the Arab accounts give more demonstrations of his wisdom than do those that have reached us by way of the Bible. They are complete in this; that the world was menaced then, by the jinn, and it was Solomon who, by his wisdom and the power of Solomon's seal, banished them forever from the Earth.

But—Solomon *banished* them!

There is a strange incompleteness in that statement, a strong suggestion of far more unsaid than is revealed. For banishment means sending to *another place.*

And another thing the Arab legends tell of consistently; those stubborn jinn who would not be banished, who remained behind and were, at last, sealed away by the might of Solomon's seal in lead-stoppered copper jars. A thousand years ago fishermen were finding in their nets an occasional such jar—with dire consequences.

Now the sea is large, and L. Ron Hubbard tells in his novel, "Slaves of Sleep," of one more such jar—and completes that half-hidden inference, fills in the rest of that picture half revealed by the terms of that sentence: *banishment!*

There are shorter items, too, of course. For instance, L. Sprague de Camp has another story—a slightly cockeyed feud between two swimming coaches. One, you see, found a woman with webbed fingers, which the other thought most unfair. But there was "Nothing In The Rules." You may guess the competitor that the rival turned up, but not the madhouse that resulted!

THE EDITOR.

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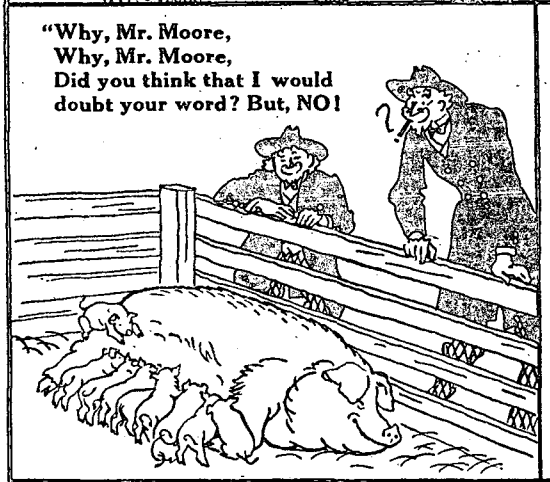

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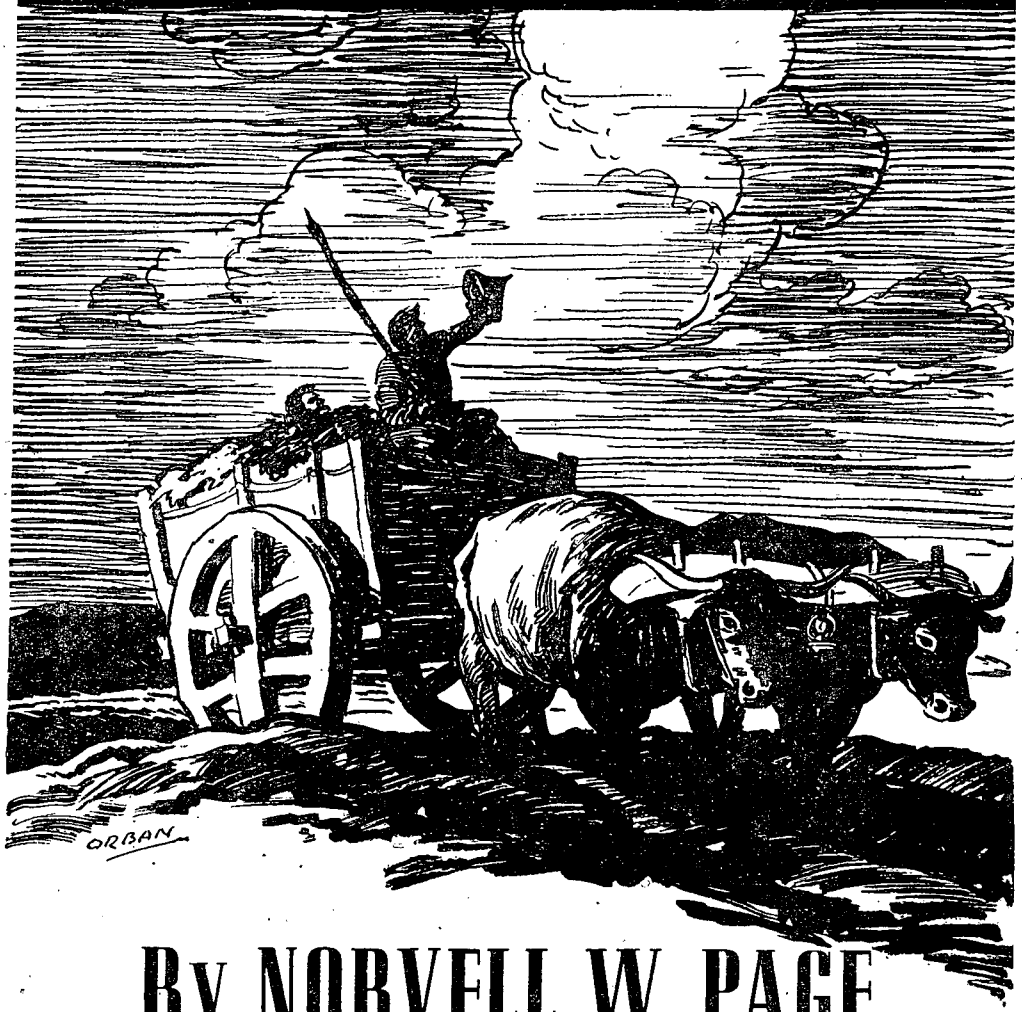
FLAME WINDS



By NORVELL W. PAGE

Author's Note:

There has ever been one name that could always set my romantic fancy straying into a thousand bypaths of history and forgotten lore, a name whose very elusiveness made it the more fascinating. I refer to the name and the fame of—Prester John.

Look it up in the dictionary: *Prester John, a legendary Christian priest and king whose dominions were assigned first, about the Twelfth Century. to the Far East and later to Ethiopia or Abyssinia. Marvelous tales were told of his wealth, power and conquests.*

And they derive the word *Prester* from

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"priest," or "presbyter." That's because they're misled by the Christian touch in the history of this great soldier of fortune, and because, too, rumors of him first reached the Western world at the time the Frankish tongue was separating from the Latin—and it is in French that "Prester" means "priest."

But when did a priest ever carve an empire out of a hostile land? That was one thing that set me thinking, and I found something that the over-religious Middle Ages overlooked. They forgot the real origin of the word "prester."

"Prester" is a Latin word, straight out of the Greek, and it was derived in turn from the Greek word which means to kindle or to burn —*pimpranai*, in anglicized spelling. And *prester* in this old meaning is the name of the hurricane, the whirlwind that sometimes sweeps the Mediterranean, bringing swirling black clouds and the shaken, steely spears of lightning! The Greeks applied the name, Prester, also to a certain kind of venomous serpent, or to a certain vein in the throat when it was swollen with anger! You see where all this is pointing, don't you? If Prester John was a priest, it was only in his latter days!

You do not name a priest for a hurricane, for the whirlwind, with its black crown glittering with lightnings; nor for a venomous snake; nor yet for an anger-swollen throat.

A slim clue, you will say; and yet I followed it. Dusty pages, a hundred casual references, but I found—

In the early part of the First Century there was a gladiator in Alexandria who bore the proud name of *Prester* John. They used to pit him against three lions at a time, or loose him against four gladiators with his favorite weapon—a sharply curved sword. And it was because of the mad fighting rages that took him, because of the speed and the fury with which he struck, and because of his sword that glittered in the death strokes like very lightning that the slaughter-loving Alexandrian crowds christened him Prester—the hurricane.

Only such a champion as his, such a veritable paladin, could have carved out a fabulous kingdom, wrested it from men, not only of another faith, but of alien and older blood. And that is what Prester John did. For I followed the fable—

You will already have noticed the discrepancy: the fame of "Prester John" spread abroad in the *Twelfth* Century, when the returning Crusaders trumpeted his name around the world. But "Hurricane John" fought in Alexandria in the First Century.

I will answer you very simply, and in a few words. Julius Caius Caesar fought and died before Christ was born, yet until the year 1918 his fame was trumpeted abroad as a living man and king. He was a mighty emperor, of many conquests and of wide power. He ruled not one, but two imperial thrones! Yes, *Caesar*, or spell it any way you like—Kaiser, Tsar, Czar. It is the same word.

And that is a difference of, not twelve, but *twenty* centuries.

The Crusaders, bragging of this Eastern Christian paladin, assumed that he was coeval with them, but they forgot the centuries it would take such a legend to grow after the decades that Prester John himself must have labored in those far, fabulous lands of the East. And it was his Herculean task that brought his name down the ages. Prester John—Caesar John.

It is a fact that, even in this remote time, that title still is sacred in the far reaches of the Gobi. An explorer friend of mine found it there when he was knocking at the back door of Tibet, flying the treacherous Gobi. It is true they no longer call it Prester John. They have long ago forgotten its origin. But the present-day mongols worship the *tengri*, the fierce spirits of the upper air, the hurricane.

And the name they put upon the ruler of one of their ancient cities in their own tongue is *Wan Tengri*—our old friend, Prester John.

This, then, is the story of Prester John, of Wan Tengri as, in the First Century, he put the Western World behind him—for the sake of his health as they would say now—and began that incredible task of his that was to echo through the centuries. Prester John, Christian priest and king, of whose wealth and power and conquests marvelous tales were told.

—*Norvell W, Page.*

I.

WHEN the red rim of the sun touched the Suntai hills and gilded the high, graceful towers of Turgohl, a single sweet, piercing note swam through the darkening twilight. Men turned uneasy eyes toward the centermost, the highest tower of all, capped in a wrought spiral of gold like a flame and gleaming with wondrous mosaics of mauve and rose marble. They knotted their fists tightly at their sides and crooked their thumbs in the protective sign of the thunder god, Balass.

"Now the tengri and the high fire of heaven protect us," whispered the men

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in the bazaars and hurriedly began to batten the open fronts of their shops. The litters of the wealthy made haste to seek the safety of their own brazen gates and high, spiked walls. On the rich blue waters of Baikul, the knout whips of the overseers cracked across the arching backs of the slaves, urging the pointed prows of the fish galleys toward the water gate. In the fields, other naked slaves swung to their shoulders the crude tools of the soil and trotted sullenly under the guards' whips.

When once more that thin wailing note that might come from the heart of the air, or might indeed sound within the bowels of man himself, the Flame Wind would begin to blow in from the Kara-korum, the desert of the Black Sands. It was a thing past the understanding of man, and it had come with the wizards of Kasimer—and against it only the walls of Turgohl or the men of Kasimer might prevail.

From the east-stretching shadows of the firs that clothed the Suntai hills, a cart pulled by a yoke of oxen heaved into sullen motion and rumbled down the black road toward the South Gate. A man in the conical white cap of the Mongol tribes stabbed at the rumps of the cattle with a sharpened stake, goading them into a lumbering trot.

He seemed alone and yet he whispered between motionless lips, "It will be close, O Wan Tengri."

From the heaped-up wool behind him, a man's deep voice rumbled out an oath. "By Ahriman, it cannot come too soon. Not all the fires of Ormazd, or this devil's wind you prate about can be as hot as this wool of thine."

"Silence!" warned the driver, fearfully. "Near Turgohl, the very wind has ears!"

A red, perspiring face thrust up through the heaped-up wool, and the sinking sun itself was no more fiery than the stiff thicket of his hair, or the crisp beard that curled about his mouth.

"Now, if these same winds would only use those ears to fan me!" He dragged a sleeve across his brow, spat out shreds of wool. *"Phagh!* I never liked sheep less!"

"Hide, fool!" the Mongol rasped. "Have I not warned—"

From the thickening air over their very heads, a voice spoke. It was sibilant and thin, that voice, and once more no man could say, least of all the red giant called Wan Tengri, whether that voice came from the air or from within himself.

"Hasten, slaves," whispered the voice, "else feel the breath of the Flame Wind!"

A trembling seized the Mongol. He snatched off his conical hat, baring his wild black hair in respect while he stabbed frantically at the rumps of the oxen.

"Master, we hear and obey!"

Wan Tengri gripped the slim steel of a dagger in his fist while his shrewd gray eyes swept the high air with a cold challenge. "Now, by the beard of Ahriman," he said softly, "if I could but find the throat that called me slave—"

"Nay." The Mongol was breathing hard through his mouth. "The wizards speak where they will. They hear and see where they will. We are doomed, Wan Tengri! Outside the walls, the Flame Wind. And inside . . . inside, the Wizards of Kasimer!"

"I hide," Wan Tengri said grimly, "but only out of respect for thee, O Kassar, my friend. As for the seeing of these wizards, did you not tell me that the soldiers will probe your load of wool with their spear points? If the wizards see so well, where is the need of that?"

The Mongol made no answer, and Wan Tengri, with a final challenging glance aloft, burrowed down again into the load of wool. The dung stench of it was suffocating in his nostrils and the prickling tendrils rasped his sweat-

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drenched flesh, but there was a grim smile on the solid lips. It was late for a man who had been harried by the warriors of the pharaohs, who had flouted the power of the Golden Throne of Khitai, to become frightened over a mere voice that whispered from the air. Some sorcerer's trickery, that was all. Superstition. A man who wore about his throat a bit of the True Cross and hence came under the powerful protection of this new God called "Christos," need not fear these barbarians.

About him now was the sound of hurrying feet, the braying of asses and the complaining roar of a fast-driven camel. He heard, above the rumble of the sand-softened cart wheels, the whistle and thud of a slave whip and a man's strangled gasp of pain. These wizards ruled things with a high hand; it was a land where a strong man could take the wealth he wanted, riches and one of these swift galleys. Then he would be off for home again. Even the steel grasp of Rome could be turned aside with gold. A villa on the purple hills of Lebanon where the wind was never harsh, where there were spices and silks and the soft-eyed girls of Caucasus with their ivory skin. He stretched out his iron-muscled legs—and the oxcart lurched to a halt.

WAN TENGRI recognized the arrogant tones that would be the guard at the South Gate. He strained his ears. Yes, they spoke the language of the Mongols which he had learned in this last hard winter with the tribes of the Kara-korum. He could hear Kassar answering, dauntless and bold. Kassar feared no man living, but only those voices that whispered from the high air. And Wan Tengri feared not even those!

A thud against the bottom of the cart told Wan Tengri that spears were making the search of the wool. Three thuds— Then three spears were groping for human flesh! He pulled a leather shield over his belly and swore under his breath. By Ahriman, if one of those brazen points found him, there would be such a fight in this gate as might make these wizards tear their snaky hair in grief! He clenched his dagger in his great left fist and fingered the hilt of his curved Damascus scimitar. Wan Tengri was called, in the tongue of the Mongols, John Wind-Devil. In the gladiatorial arenas at Alexandria, they had another name for him. They had seen his fierce fighting rages and the assault before which nothing could stand, and the poetical Greeks had christened him for the terror of those narrow seas, the hurricane that shredded their ships to toothpicks, whose fierce lightnings struck like swords of flame, *Prester,* the hurricane—and he was Prester John. Let them find him, and they would learn what a *prester* could do in far-off Kara-korum!

An oath sprang to Wan Tengri's bearded lips, and he smothered it. One of the spears had found his thigh. He lay without a quiver, waiting, every muscle taut. If the spear probed again—

"In with you, Mongol," came the guard's arrogant voice. "Forget not the guard when you go out tomorrow!"

The cart lurched forward and, in the hot darkness, Wan Tengri grinned wolfishly. *He* would not forget the guard at the South Gate! He spat a curse and ground a wisp of wool into the spear cut on his thigh. The sweet, piercing note sounded again and there was the distant clang of the closing brazen gates and a man's scream. Some poor devil caught between the metal teeth of those great portals. Well, Wan Tengri at least was inside. He plucked cautiously at the wool over his head, and the cool night air sifted through to his greedy nostrils, bringing the scents of this marble-walled city of Turgohl. Churned, dung-heavy mud underfoot but clearer, sharper than that, the tang of stored spices and the thick sweetness of

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of jasmine. Wan Tengri felt his blood quicken. He thrust aside the wool. Here in the narrow, pigsty streets, the blue dusk was thick.

"I leave you here, Kassar," he rumbled. "The protection of the One True God upon you."

Kassar's yellow teeth gleamed in a grin. "Thou art the father of all good fortune, Wan Tengri. I thought their spears had found thee."

Wan Tengri grunted and, with a lithe motion, sprang to the earth. He towered higher than the side of the great-wheeled oxcart, higher still when he clapped a Mongol hat upon his fiery locks, a great solid-limbed man with gray eyes thrusting out fearlessly above the tangle of his beard. He cast into the cart a small bag that chinked softly.

"A gift to speed thee, brother!"

Kassar's grin faded. He scooped up the bag. "Nay, it is wizard's loot. I dare not."

Wan Tengri shrugged. "Did he enchant me, then? Nay, his-wizard's head will ring for many a day from the clout I gave him! Take this, then." He slipped the keen, long blade of his dagger from its sheath and dug its point inches deep into the wooden flank of the cart. It quivered there with a note like a silvery bell. "Fare you well, brother."

Wan Tengri strode off into the darkness of this strange city of the wizards, along the streets with the shuttered windows, with the high white walls and their brass-spiked tops. His shrewd eyes swept up to the soaring towers, fixed curiously on the one tipped in flambage gold where a last finger of the setting sun still lingered redly. His teeth gleamed for a brief moment amid the thicket of his beard. For a man of his stature, he moved softly, towering in his white felt cone of a hat, bulking huge in the white felt cloak that swathed him, royal gifts from the khan of Kassar's tribe. These wild men of the barren Kara-korum had tested him in battle and not found him wanting! Afterward, they had shed blood and broken the arrow of friendship.

The stout warriors of the Emperor of Chin had tasted his steel, and before that fighting men all the way from Egypt to Ceylon and ever eastward through the Sea of Chin where men of his race had never come before. Which was why he must push ever northward in the hope of crossing the blue sea of Baikul and trending back home. There was no going back the way he had come. There were too many powerful enemies. And should such a man as Prester John tremble now before a few sorcerers and their slave guards? Wan Tengri tipped back his big head and boomed out a great laugh that echoed strangely along the empty street.

ABRUPTLY, a pale red light bloomed in the air over his head, and he shrank back against a wall of gleaming marble. His sword whined from its sheath and made a thread of blue, glittering steel in the dusk, caught the red gleam from overhead like new-spilled blood. And the sibilant, mocking voice spoke to him from the air:

"Remain where you stand, slave, until the guard comes!"

The light faded and Wan Tengri's teeth gleamed in silent laughter. Let fools who were terrified wait for the guard. Wan Tengri had business elsewhere—yet it might be well to test his steel upon the guards of Turgoh!

"To Ahriman with these wizards of Kasimer," he muttered and touched the bit of the True Cross which hung about his throat. Its pressure against his flesh reassured him. Behind him, he heard a sound he knew too well, a sound that echoed from edge to edge of the civilized world—the ordered tramp of marching soldiers, the clank of their arms. For an instant, Wan Tengri's teeth bared in a wolfish snarl, and he gripped his scimi-

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tar—then he shook his head. He might slaughter them all, but it would only set all the soldiers of Turgohl upon his heels. Better to slip away from them now.

The tramp of marching men was closer, just around the turn of this crooked, muddy rut of a street. There was no hole into which he could duck until they passed, no new turn in the street. But there was a wall crested with brazen spikes! In an instant, Wan Tengri had the sword between his teeth. His mighty arms reached upward to grasp the spikes. A heave pulled his deerskin boots clear of the sucking liquid mud, a quick swing and he rolled against the spikes, lay there motionless on top of the wall. His right hand lifted to the sword hilt. Around the corner swung the helmeted men of the watch.

There were ten men tramping behind their captain. Light spears were slung across their shoulders, with quiver and bow, and at their sides clanked the long, curved sword of the plainsman. Wan Tengri estimated them narrowly. From his elevation, he could slash down a half of them before they knew what struck. As for the rest? His lips tautened away from his teeth. It was as good a way to go as any, good steel in your fist and a hard fight, and Wan Tengri knew a rising anger—the fury of rage that had won him the name of Prester John. There were lights like pale lightnings in his eyes and the cords of his throat were tightening. The sword hovered aloft—

"By Belass!" the leader of the ten whispered. "By Ormazd and the winds of *Tengri,* he has broken the enchantment!"

The captain of the ten pointed with a trembling hand toward the spot where Wan Tengri's tracks came to an abrupt end. The men looked fearfully about them in the darkness, but the brims of their helmets kept their eyes down. They did not think to look up where avenging death hovered in uplifted steel.

"Some greater wizard," the captain said. "Some great wizard has broken the spell of the All-High! He—" The man peered over his shoulder into the shadows. "He has gone now. We can gain nothing by staying. This way, men. This way—" Before he had taken three strides, the captain was running, and pell-mell, their sheathed swords clanging wildly, the watch raced up the dark street!

Laughter welled up into Wan Tengri's throat, but he choked it down, glanced challengingly up into the night air where before that pale-red light had bloomed. He touched again the bit of the True Cross.

"Men ruled by fear," he muttered in his beard, "are cowards at heart. There is nothing here can harm a free man and a free soul."

Wan Tengri lurched to his feet atop the wall, sprang lightly down into the mud, and followed rapidly in the wake of the guard. He paused an instant at an intersection of narrow streets to orient himself, then hurried on. Finally, he stopped before a door striped gold and green and struck on it forcefully with the hilt of his sword. Kassar's directions had served him well. From this point on, he was his own man, with his fortune and his way to make. He hummed lightly under his breath as he waited impatiently for the response to his hammering.

PRESENTLY, a small wicket opened in the door and a bland yellow face peered out at him with slant eyes. "Open, Tsien Hui!" Wan Tengri ordered shortly. "It is business and a fat profit for your sticky, yellow fingers. Kassar, the Mongol, sent me."

The wicket snapped shut and, an instant later, the door itself swung wide. The Chinese bowed low, hands clasped comfortably across his padded belly. He led the way around the screen built to keep out the devils of the Yellow King-

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dom, the devils that could move only through doors and windows and then only in straight lines. He shuffled on to a room hung in the rich carpets of Sarouk and Bokhara, motioned courteously to Wan Tengri to be seated.

"Art no Mongol," Tsien Hui muttered with his ever-smiling lips, while his fat-lidded eyes took careful survey of the giant who sat cross-legged before him. "Art Barbarian out of the West."

Wan Tengri started, but controlled his muscles with an effort. He should be used to the knowledge of these yellow-skinned devils by now. He grumbled an assent. "It matters not to you, yellow thief," he said shortly. "I have need of money." He scooped out a pair of ruby earrings from the bag of stolen loot he had offered to Kassar, tossed them carelessly on the rug before him. He grinned slightly behind the cover of his red beard. That wizard's ears would be sore for a while. Mournfully, Wan Tengri shook his head.

"Balass rubies," he said sorrowfully. "From my own dead mother's ears I took them not two moons ago. Aye, she was a wonderful woman, but she would not want my mother's son to starve."

"So," Tsien Hui stirred the blood-red drops with a long-nailed forefinger. "So . . . Balass rubies." He picked them up and weighed them in a yellow palm. "From thy dead mother's ears, sayest thou."

Wan Tengri's hand closed about the hilt of his sword. "Aye," he said softly. "From her small, sweet ears, heathen."

The drops of jewel blood fascinated Wan Tengri's eyes. They would grace the ears of any princess, such a princess as he would take unto himself when, filled with honors and wealth, he sent his own long galley back to the West again. He smiled—and then his eyes widened fearfully. There was suddenly nothing in the yellow palm of the Chinese, nothing where an instant before those exquisite jewels had glistened! Tsien Hui smiled and bobbed his head amicably.

"It is as I thought, O Barbarian," he said. "The jewels were stolen from some wizard."

Like an uncoiling snake, Wan Tengri leaped across the space that separated them. His left hand clamped about the fat-padded yellow throat, and there was red rage, as bright as Balass rubies, in his eyes.

"Thief!" he roared. "Liar! Give me those jewels! Do you think to rob me? Me, Prester John?"

He shook the Chinese like a monkey, and fear deadened the man's eyes. He trembled in that savage grip. "Nay, Barbarian, I do not lie to thee. In this wondrous city, strange things pass. No man may steal, for if he steal, when the owner wakes to find his belonging gone, it ceases to be. The magicians, who rule this place, have said that things are only because we believe them to exist, and that which no man believes does not exist. See, is there sound if a great tree fall where no ear is to hear? So, it is only by thinking of things that they are at all. If a magician misses his substance, he thinks it out, and it ceases to be!"

Wan Tengri grinned wolfishly. "Lies, pretty lies, fat thief! If this be true, then surely I may find no hidden things about your clothes, eh?" Deliberately he stripped Tsien Hui of his garments. Afterward, he combed the rug with his fingers and stood, staring like a caged thing about the walls. There was nowhere else the jewels could have been secreted, and yet—

"You see, Barbarian," whined the naked Tsien Hui, hugging his yellow shanks, "it is as I told thee. No thing is unless men think of it, and the owner of that bauble—"

Wan Tengri roared in anger. "Stupidity and lies! Why cower there, fat thief, unless it be in memory of my

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The jewels were gone from the pouch—and in their place, a flat, triangular head swayed.

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thoughts of that jewel?" Suddenly Wan Tengri bethought him of the jewels at his waist. He snatched the leathern bag from his belt and upended it over his empty palm. No jewels came out. No single gem of the small fortune he had stolen from the wizard—but a wicked, flattened triangular head thrust out! A snake's fangs darted toward Wan Tengri's open and waiting palm!

II.

Only battle-trained muscles could move a man more swiftly than the strike of a snake, the skill of a man whom the fickle Alexandria mob had named for the hurricane. Wan Tengri acted without thought, with the incredible swiftness of those who have lived by the speed of hand and eye. Both hands moved together. Writhing snake and leather bag kited toward the silk-draped ceiling. Wan Tengri's sword sang hissing from its scabbard—and the snake divided into two harmless fragments in the air.

Wan Tengri's lips were curved in a contemptuous smile. His deftness meant nothing to his pride. Had he not sliced arrows in mid-flight? Used the swift flail of his sword as a shield against their biting sting? He flipped his scimitar into the air and caught it neatly by the hilt.

"It is in my mind, yellow turtle," he said gently, "that thou art a wizard! This fuddlement of what men think makes things be I have no understanding of. But in the Hind, I have seen such befuddlement of mind that I saw tigers where no tiger was, and it comes to me that thou art such as those tricksters of the Hind—a wizard. I think it is thee that has charmed these bits of colored crystal from my pouch. Now, I have an unfailing test for a wizard. Everyone knows, of course, that only enchanted steel can harm a wizard. Consequently, if you do not survive when I slice your too-fat throat, I shall know that I have wronged thee, Tsien Hui, and I shall revere your memory as that of an honest man."

Tsien Hui's smile was a ghastly thing. "It is a sorry jest, Barbarian, yet I feel that my honor is touched. The jewels in truth vanished from my own hands. Therefore"—his voice grew heavy with sorrow—"therefore, you must let me make thee a gift."

Before Wan Tengri could more than smile, there came a heavy thunder of sword hilts upon the wicket door. "Open, Tsien Hui!" a man's voice thundered. "Open, and surrender the slave of the All-High!"

Wan Tengri's smile did not waver. "Now this is three times," he said slowly, "that I have been called a slave this night. It is not a name I care for." His eyes quested over the room and, with a quick stride, he reached the edge of the screen that sheltered the door. "Go to your treasure house, Tsien Hui, and prepare this little gift you so graciously offer. I will attend to this small matter."

He whipped a simgle glance over his shoulder toward the Chinese, and the man had vanished. There was no quiver of a wall-hung rug to show where he had gone, and Wan Tengri cursed softly. So he must fight with treachery at his back? He threw back his head and his deep laughter boomed out.

"Come, fools," he cried. "Come and take a—slave."

With a flip of his sword point, he threw aside the bar which secured the door, and a wedge of men drove in through the opening. Their weapons were out, and the flickering yellow glow of the great Chinese lantern from the ceiling touched golden fire on their brass breast plates and embossed helmets. Wan Tengri laughed again and his sword flicked out like a caress of a snake's togue. A dragging touch of the tip across a throat, then it whipped high

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to sever an outthrust sword arm. It was only after that second blow had fallen that a great shout of anger and dismay sprang from Wan Tengri's lips.

He had struck true. He needed no reassurance on that point, for, through the years, his life had hinged on the lightning swiftness of eye and sword arm. There should be two men on the floor, one with his head almost severed from his shoulders and the other minus an arm. There should be—but there weren't! There was no blur on the shining steel of Wan Tengri's sword, and no bright, glad rush of crimson heralded victory!

Instead, the captain's point reached out to hover against Wan Tengri's chest. "You cannot harm the enchanted guards of Turgohl, fool," the captain said contemptuously. "Throw down your sword!"

WAN TENGRI sprang back a full pace from the threat of that sword point. His breath was quick and dry in his throat and fury was rising hotly behind his eyes. Enchantments! Everywhere he moved, he met the machinations of these accursed wizards. So his sword, his fine Damascus steel, could not harm them. And yet—they wore armor! If they wore armor, they could be harmed!

Men were milling out from behind the other side of the screen, circling toward him warily—a captain and ten. With a swift movement, Wan Tengri shoved his sword home into its scabbard. He bulked huge against the bright crimsons and blues and golden yellows of the carpeted walls. The coned hat had fallen to the floor and the fiery locks were a halo for the fierceness of his face. His knotted, hairy fists were sledges at his sides.

"You have called me slave," he said, his voice rumbling deep in his barrel chest. "Surely, fighting men who cannot be harmed need not stand back from a slave?"

The captain had the smiling, sly face of a cat. "Give up your sword, slave," he ordered. He made a small gesture with his hand and his men moved out on his flanks, their swords poised like ready spears.

Wan Tengri appeared to ponder while, under his frowning heavy brows, his eyes canvassed every possibility. He muttered his thoughts aloud: "Surrender my sword, is it? Now, that is a thing I have never done, even when I faced a double score of the stout warriors of the Emperor of Chin. It is true they were not enchanted, but they had a cause they thought was just. Look you now, captain." Wan Tengri took a half pace backward and felt the silken brush of a carpet against his swinging fists. "Look you, it was no small matter for which they fought, since I had stolen away the favorite concubine of the Emperor Han himself, and—"

It was a titan's feat he performed. Bokhara rugs are silken and soft and they may be drawn through the circuit of a small woman's bracelet, but they are heavy and their very size and the resistance of the air made the thing Wan Tengri intended seem incredible. With a single wrench of his two hands, he tore the carpet from its hangings and, before those swords, no more than a yard away, could reach him, he had swung the entire heavy fabric over the heads of the guards as deftly as a *retarius* in the arena casts his net over a rival gladiator. Wan Tengri might have fled then, but his anger—the anger of Hurricane John—was aroused.

"So I'm a slave!" he whispered.

He stooped while the men slashed at the carpet net and, reaching under its verge, he seized the ankles of the captain of the ten. If they wore armor, they could be harmed—and no man should dub Prester John a slave and live! Wan Tengri's huge shoulders arched and his thighs corded. He straightened, and snapped the captain's

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head against the floor as a boy might crack a snake's head on a rock! The helmet bounced and at last Wan Tengri saw the blood flow.

It was like red wine in the rage-dried throat of Wan Tengri. He threw back his head in bellowing laughter, and his grip on the ankles of the captain did not loosen. He lifted the man's broken head clear of the floor and set the body swinging against the pivot of his arms, once, twice, a third time while keen steel slashed through the carpet and one man, then another stumbled through to leap forward with swords lifted for the kill! Three times, Wan Tengri swung the body, and the third time, he whirled it in a great circle around his head. His shout was a roar like a beast's. His human war club caught a guard across shoulder and chest. It picked him off his feet like a toy and hurled him against his fellow. The human war club was sheathed in brass. The men did not stir.

Twice more the mighty flail of Wan Tengri swung, and those men who still could stand fled screaming into the streets. After them, Wan Tengri tossed the broken corpse of the captain. The carpet he had torn down revealed a doorway and, snatching up his felt cap, Wan Tengri strode through it. His feet were light and there was a singing in his blood. He hummed through his nose. The frightened squeals of women came to his ears now. A door resisted his hand, and he bowed his shoulders to wrench it from the hinges, and then lurched through.

"Come out, Tsien Hui, thou mangy sewer rat," he bellowed. "Come out before I take thy hovel to pieces."

He was in a room where a perfumed fountain played softly, and there was the languorous odor of incense, of musk in his nostrils. Here the lights were soft—women's quarters. He snorted. Tsien Hui was the sort who would hide among his women. He took three ranging strides across the room and, against the farther wall, a gossamer veil parted and a woman stepped unhurriedly through. Her breasts were cupped in jewel-studded plates of gold, and a jeweled girdle held a translucent skirt of silk that swirled with her slow dancing steps. Her hair was night-black and twisted close about a finely modeled skull, and there was pride in the carriage of her chin.

"So now Tsien Hui tries more human enchantments," Wan Tengri said lightly. "Still, it is a gift a man can accept."

He towered over the girl and she looked up into his face, dark eyes unafraid. "You're no more than a child," Wan Tengri rumbled. "That old dog should be ashamed of himself. Still, I can admire his choice." With a quick gesture, Wan Tengri tore off the jeweled breast plates. He swung on his heel with a short laughter. "I have more need of wealth than women, child," he said. "And these will help. Yes, these will help. Tell that fat fool, Tsien Hui, that if he wants his throat whole, it will be wise not to use it to call these jewels back."

The girl stood where he had left her, near the sheer curtains, where the perfumed fountain splashed. Her slender arms were crossed over her breasts, and there was a look of wonder in her eyes. For an instant, Wan Tengri hesitated in the doorway, then he strode heavily along the way he had come. His vengeance was incomplete, but perhaps it was better that Tsien Hui should live. He couldn't trust the Chinese, but the man could be governed by fear. Wan Tengri strode out into the street and stood with his head tipped back, his eyes questing the black sky. It was a rich town, and a man could fight enchantments with a man's weapons. He looked at the shattered corpse of the captain of the guard, face down in the mud. He rumbled a curse in his throat. A soldier deserved better than that, even a soldier of cow-

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ardly wizards. He caught the man up and carried him to lie on Tsien Hui's choicest silks; then, with a wry grin, Wan Tengri strode off along the twisting narrow streets of Turgohl—and he walked in the middle of the way. Let cowardly dogs skulk in the shadows; let the guards clank through the mud and over cobbled ways. A warrior could hold his own!

NOW AND AGAIN, he caught the tinkle of a lute or the whine of a troubadour's one-string fiddle from behind forbidding walls; now and again the warmth of incense or spices curled his nostrils while he drove his booted feet through the slime of the alleys. There was a muted, constant sound that drifted down from the high air. It rose and fell with a throaty moaning. Now and again, there was a thin and rising shriek like a demon's laugh. The flame wind—the flame wind of Turgohl was blowing! Yet here in the streets, it was cool.

There was a restlessness in Wan Tengri's soul. It had something to do with the thought that he was locked into this city. For a free man, any restraint was irksome. Trapped— Yes, once those gates closed and the flame wind began to mourn across the black sands, no animal thing could survive within two arrow flights of the walls. A wind that would burn out a man's guts and suffocate him; a wind that would leave his body like a well-roasted pig upon the plains. Wan Tengri lifted his challenging, proud head and turned his eyes toward the high central tower of Turgohl. Under the lash of the flame wind, it glowed like a many-colored jewel, terrifyingly beautiful—ominous with enchantment.

For a slow moment, doubts shook Wan Tengri, then he brushed them aside. He began once more to hum through his nose. He had jewels in his pouch that Tsien Hui would not dare to call back. He must hunt up a new money lender and market them. There must be ways that a strong man could rise. Who knows? Perhaps he was destined to carve himself an empire out of this mysterious East? Give him a foothold and a chance to raise a stout following, and he would sweep these wizards into the crystal blue waters of Baikul. There would be slaves to do his bidding, and concubines like that soft girl creature whose jewels he carried in his pouch. Enchantments—*phagh!*

Wan Tengri stood with his fists on his hips and glowered up at that mystical tower. By Ahriman, since he was a follower of Christos, and with a bit of the True Cross about his neck, too, it was almost his duty to fight these wizards and enlighten these poor fools. He could do that best if he himself was the ruler; then they would accept Christos or he would slit their throats, and a deal of wealth should trickle into the chests of the ruler of Turgohl. Wan Tengri nodded in satisfaction to himself. Well, then it was settled. He would gather a force of stout men. They would have to be city dwellers, not the superstitious Mongols. They would be thieves—

In sheer exuberance, Wan Tengri tossed his scimitar glittering into the air. First, he must find his thieves, and he thought he knew where to look. If the wizards could call their property back, then the thieves would devote themselves to stealing weapons and foodstuffs from the major supply houses. For thieves would steal. It was in the blood. Wan Tengri grinned wolfishly. Who should know better than he? He stalked through the streets until he heard again the clank of marching men, then he followed in their wake. Eventually, they would lead him to the guardhouse, and there he would find the source of their supplies. He needed a few weapons himself; a dagger to replace that he had given to Kassar and a war club, less burdensome than the captain's body,

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since the guards apparently were impervious to his steel of Damascus. The guard filed presently into a low building against the north walls of Turgohl. The small of the salt sea came strongly to Wan Tengri's nostrils here, and he leaned his shoulder into a dark corner to wait.

Against the blueness of the sky, he could make out the sturdy silhouette of a pacing guard on the city wall. He could even make out the slow pacing of sandaled feet through the undying mournfulness of the flame wind. Wan Tengri waited until the sentry was at the far end of his post, then he reached the shadow of the guardhouse with a half dozen long, silent strides. The only openings that emitted lights were long arrow slits, too narrow for any man of his girth—but the wall was made of sun-baked mud. And the roof? Tengri waited his chance, then, with a short run, he leaped up and caught the low edge of the building's flat top, swung himself easily to the roof. He grunted with satisfaction, squatted close against the marble of the city's wall and began to slice the hard-packed earth with his sword point.

HE WAS only a few inches deep into the roof when he heard a sword beat out its brazen alarm upon a soldier's shield. His head whipped up, but he could not see that it was himself that had been spotted. Undoubtedly one of the prowling thieves whom he sought. Wan Tengri nodded to himself in satisfaction. What did these enchantments matter, when a man could boast of a brain like Prester John's? He took this early success for a good omen. Yes, surely, he was commissioned to convert the heathen—and take a nice profit for himself, of course. He rose to his full height and strode to the edge of the roof.

Against the shadows of the opposite wall, a twisted small man flitted like a shadow. His clothing was brown rags, and it took keen eyes to see him. More like an animal of the hills than a human being, he seemed, with his scuttling manner of flight and his quick, furtive legs. Three guards were pounding in his wake. The alarm was being beaten on a dozen shields and, through the brazen clamor, Wan Tengri caught the shouts of fresh guards coming at fast time from the streets of the city. Others were streaming out of the guardhouse itself. In the dark, a bow twanged with a bitter, harsh note and an arrow flitted across the open square. The fleeing man went down, bounced up again. But his pace was slowed.

Wan Tengri deliberately unslung the bow of laminated horn which had been his parting gift from the Mongols. "To me, comrade!" he shouted coolly. "To me! I will succor you!"

Guards' white faces twisted toward him and, behind on the wall, he heard the sentry's hoarse shout. Wan Tengri pivoted easily, and the notched, steel-tipped arrow, feathered with horse hair in the Mongol fashion, pulled back until it touched his ear. The bowstring's twang, beside that other fainter note, was like the roar of a wounded lion amid the yap of jackals. The arrow was a flitting dark streak in the dim night, scarcely lifting from a straight line in its flight. The man on the wall screamed. His arms clawed against the blue sky and he curved backward out of sight.

"A nice dive, friend," Wan Tengri whispered.

The air fluttered with the whispering of fast-sped arrows. Attention was diverted from the wounded thief against the walls to this stouter challenge from the roof, but Wan Tengri was at the task he loved next to the swift flicker of sword steel. He was never still for an instant. Arrows formed a constant stream from his powerful bow, and each twang of the gut brought its echoing scream from the earth below. His constant movement disturbed their answer-

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ing fire, and laughter bubbled from his lips; laughter and the mockery of his insults.

"Enchant me, fools," he called, "or there will not be a man alive in the morning. Bring forth your wizards. What, not proof against a bit of stick and steel, an arrow driven by the insignificant horn of the auroch and a bit of lion gut? What, have the wizards drunk up your manhood?"

A group of guards formed under the protection of the wall, marched out with their shields locked in a solid roof above them, and from its cover archers flung their swift-sped arrows up at the dreadful figure poised on the roof.

"Well done," Wan Tengri cheered them on. "It might work against another man! How can you fight the Tengri, the devil-wind of the high heavens?"

THE horn bow arched more strongly as he put his back into a gigantic pull at the string. The released gut roared and the arrow rang the brazen shields like a drum—like a broken drum. The leader of the shield band fell with the arrow through his skull and the formation was broken. How the arrows leaped now from Wan Tengri's bow! He heard a faint step beside him, whirled with the arrow notched and saw a wizened small face leering up into his.

"You called me, comrade," the man whispered hoarsely. "I came!"

The whisper of the arrows died out of the air. There was the thud of running feet as the guards took cover and Wan Tengri smiled down upon the twisted figure of the thief in brown rags. The man's back was hunched and one arm swung limply at his side, but the eyes glistened in the dark and there was knowledge and courage, too, in that hideous small face. Wan Tengri held out his right hand and made a curious figure with his twisted fingers.

"We hang together," he chuckled.

"Not while thy bow is strung, comrade!" the thief answered. "So you are one of us? Come. This is a sorry place for the brotherhood." He turned and scuttled away along the roofs of the warehouses, and Wan Tengri, after a regretful glance toward the court, deserted save for the arrow-tufted bodies of the slain, followed the thief he had come to find. So his conquest of Turgohl was begun! With this small fiend and his fellows behind him, he would soon enslave these wizards and their wealth!

"It seems to me, comrade," rumbled Wan Tengri, "that a horn bow and a good fir arrow has a certain magic of its own. It seems to me, we should find a way to improve this sorry lot of the brotherhood."

"Speak not so loud, comrade," his crippled guide whispered fearfully. "The flame wind has ears!"

"Then we'll tweak them." Wan Tengri threw back his head and laughed. "Or perhaps we'll clip them a bit. Now I fancy a slit and an overcut—"

"In the name of the Tengri, friend, quiet!"

Wan Tengri shook his great head and laughed again, and the pale-red light he had seen before bloomed overhead.

"Stand still, slave," came the whisper of that disembodied voice. "Stand still and wait your masters!"

Wan Tengri's teeth glistened amid his fiery beard, and he drew his bow taut, sent an arrow hurtling up into the heart of the floating light.

"That for your whispering flame wind!" he rumbled. "Come, thou good thief, we'll get on."

He turned his head toward the spot where the small twisted figure had stood and it was gone! With an oath, he threw himself toward the place—and pitched forward on his face! He thrust up violently from the roof and stared down in amazement at his feet. It was the fault of his feet. He had ordered

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them to move and they had not. He swore violently and reached down to tug at his flexed and motionless legs—and still the feet would not heed his order. By Ahriman, they had sunk deep into the roof!

"Wait for your masters!" sighed the wind.

Tengi's eyes were strained wide with rage, and they caught the fiery glisten of that pale, dying light. He struck his quiver with a fierce hand. A mere half score of arrows remained. His sword—it whined from the scabbard and quivered in his waiting hand.

"Enchanted," Wan Tengri whispered. "Ha! These wizards have more power than I thought. Come, wizards! Come, devils! We will see who is the master, thou and thy sorceries or—Prester John!"

III.

THERE was no answer to his challenge, only the sighing of the flame wind and the distant shouts of the rallying guard. Night laid its concealing shadows everywhere, and yonder the tower with its golden crest of flame burned like a jewel against the sky. Wan Tengri felt hatred rise within him. He strained all his strength against the grip of the roof upon his feet and could not move them. Savagely, he struck his sword against the obdurate earth. It rang like a temple gong, but the surface was scarcely dented.

Wan Tengri forced himself to coolness. Courage did well enough, but when his ten arrows were sped the guard could stand at a distance and turn him into a porcupine.

"But, you fool," he muttered, "the points will be turned inward, and that will do you no good, thou bag of devil-wind."

His eyes quested about him. He could touch the city wall with outstretched sword point. A dozen feet above his head, the brazen spikes that were its crest caught glints of light from the stars. No help that way. Wan Tengri stared down bitterly at his imprisoned feet. He was averse to losing those good members. They had served him well over countless leagues. Better death than stumping about on his ankle bones. Deliberately, he prodded at the tough earth of the roof. Immediately around his feet, it had the hardness of weathered oak, but a cubit away it was softer. With frantic haste, Wan Tengri wielded the hard-tempered steel of his scimitar, gouging out the block that incased his feet. The shouts of the guards had faded into order, and the echo of a sharp command came to his ears. They had reformed then, and were coming to the attack. By Ahriman, he had been wrong to call these guards cowardly. Man to man, they could fight! It was only magic and the unexplained sorcery of the wizards of Kasimer that turned their bones to water.

Wan Tengri set his teeth on a groan. The earth yielded so slowly to his gouging sword point! He fought for the saving humor that always buoyed him up. He was a great deal like a man upon a tree limb, and hacking it off close to the trunk. When he had dug his hole deep enough, he would fall through into the warehouse of the wizards. Grimly, he forced his lips to curve in a smile. If he were lucky, he would find more arrows beneath him, and the great war bow would sing its bellowing song again. If he were lucky—

The regular tread of the marching guard came to his ears again, and he gave a quick glance about him as he labored. How would they come at him? Some ladder that led to the roof? Well, his arrows would hold them in check for a while. And afterward? Sweat stood out on his forehead, stung his eyes. He dashed a felten sleeve across them and

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labored on. He had a shallow ditch cut all about him. How thick was the roof? Too thick, by all the devils. As thick as his own skull. Why had he let his swollen pride goad him into flinging challenge against that unknown power? The glimmer of the flame tower seemed to mock him. There, the march of the men was stationary now! There came the rasp of an order. They were mounting the roof!

Frantically, Wan Tengri looked about him. It was not death that harassed him, but the thought of defeat. He who had never bowed his head before any victor, had never had to hold up a pleading thumb to the fickle mobs of Alexandria. Christos! They might not kill him! He might be enslaved by their enchantments and become a witless drudge in the fields, under the lash of the slave masters! His eyes reached up despairingly to the crest of the wall where the spear points glistened. Easy enough to loop one of them with the lariat he had learned to use among the Mongols, which was wrapped now about his waist. But what was the use of that? He could not pull his feet off. He could not— Abruptly, laughter pumped from his lungs. His hands feverishly unwound the lariat.

"Wait, fools!" he called to the guards, and he made it a whisper like the dying whisper of the flame wind. It carried well through the quiet night. "Wait, fools. Do you think your wizards have power? I am a greater wizard. Twice tonight I have broken their enchantments like a chain woven with a maiden's hair! If one guard dares to put his foot upon this roof, *I will pull down the walls of Turgoh!*"

THE LARIAT whirled thrice about his head and the loop spun up into the clear air, settled over the spike embedded in the topmost marble block. So these wizards thought they could defeat him! Well, there were secrets they had not learned. Their marble walls were laid marvelously close together, but without mortar. His rope would work like a lever on that upthrust spear point to roll the stone block from its base. What did it weigh? Three, four hundredweight? His mighty shoulders had lifted a thousand pounds—and his feet were anchored. He could not pull them off!

There was silence after his shout, and Wan Tengri stared upward at the secured rope, drew it taut, with a loop about his body and twisted it around his arms. It was a nice calculation he must make. It would take all his strength to stir that marble block, yet once it started to roll, he must ease the strain lest he pull it down atop him! Laughter was pumping at his mighty chest again. Well, it was better to go out that way, in one sweet, clean blow, than to slave for sorcerers and wizards!

"March back to your quarters," Wan Tengri whispered, "or I will pull down the walls! The sorcery is already at work. Will you go?"

A whisper from the flame wind answered: "Forward! Bring me this boasting fool to labor among the slaves!"

Wan Tengri said: "It is the last warning."

He drew himself to his fullest height and reached high up on the rope of plaited horsehair. With it he had roped and thrown a wild stallion of the plains; he had held a raging tiger prisoner. It would not fail him now. His chest arched high with a deep-sucked breath. He threw his strength against the rope, wrenched violently. That was to loosen the block in its seat. The rope bit deep into the muscled swelling of his arms. He could hear the mumble of men's voices and the creak of wood as a guard set foot upon the ladder. There was no time for nice calculation. The stone must come down!

Wan Tengri got a new grip upon the rope. His shoulders arched and the corded muscles dented his thighs. The

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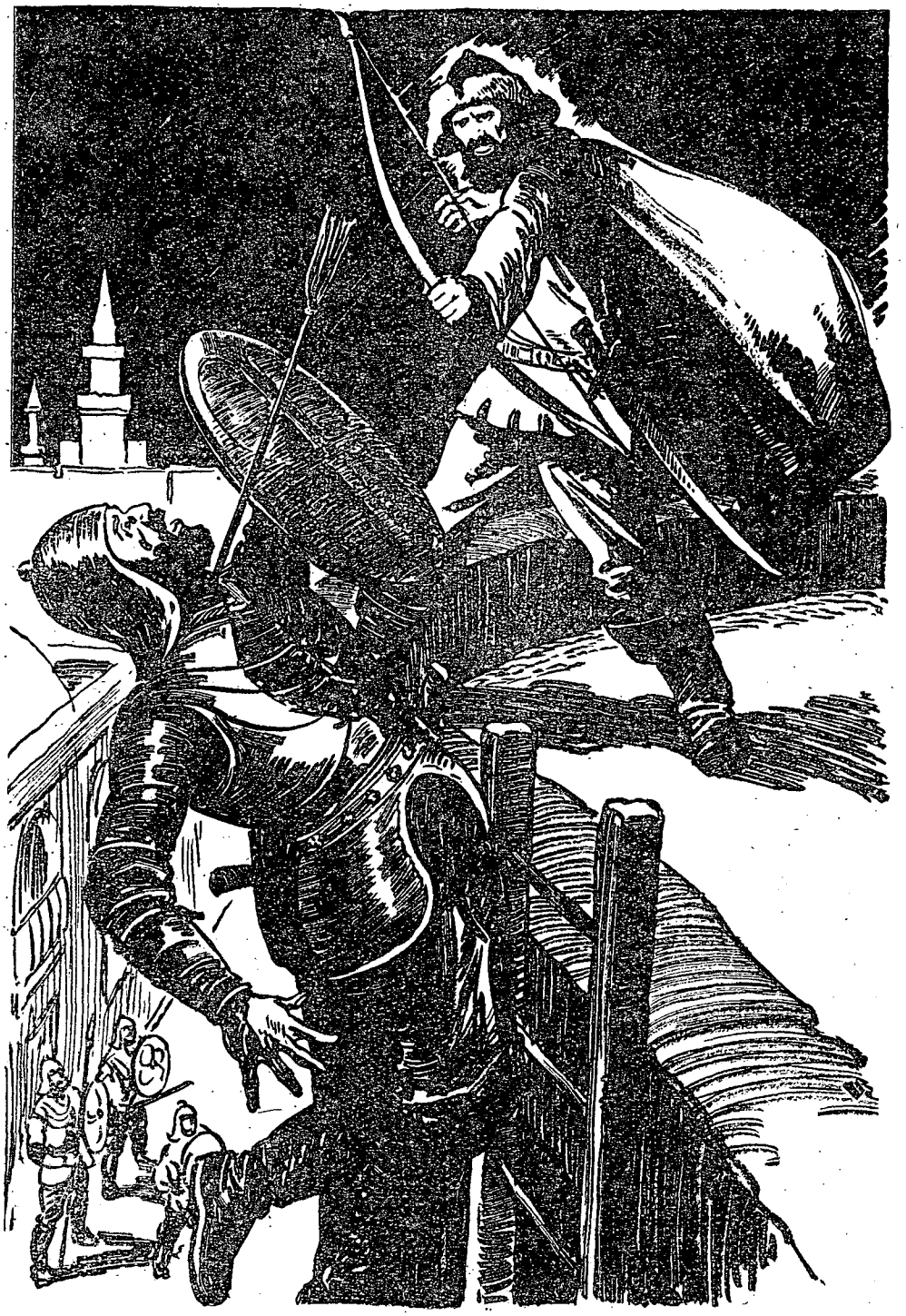

"Not that way, my friend, do you take Prester John!" he roared.

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veins writhed like serpents in his temples. Cloth ripped across his back with a hissing whisper like an arrow's flight, and still the stone did not move! Wan Tengri's rage surged through him like the touch of the flame wind. His ankles threatened to disjoint themselves from the strain of his arms. With savage violence, he flogged himself to further effort. The muscles across his loins seemed to creak. A wrench—, *Ah!* There had been movement that time. The shadows of the wall had changed. The block was leaning toward him! With the final exhaustion of his strength, Wan Tengri wrenched at the rope like a wild beast at a leash. The block leaned farther. There was a grating rasp of stone grinding on stone.

"A warning!" Wan Tengri whispered as he collapsed backward to the roof. He could do no more than whisper. "A warning! The first block falls!"

His eyes were riveted to that mighty block, leaning toward him with such splendid, ponderous slowness. Did it bring him death—or freedom? Too soon to tell. Too soon to know where its mighty weight would strike. He heard a frightened shout from a guardsman.

"Back!" Wan Tengri strained his panting lungs for the shout. "Back, before I tear down the walls of Turgohl!"

Ah, that block was beautiful! Its spear point caught the glitter of every glimmering light. White and clean. If this was death— Wan Tengri forced his drained body to his feet. If this was death, it would find Prester John ready! The stone was gathering speed; its roll remained ponderous and slow, but with each food it plunged more swiftly. Wan Tengri laughed. He caught up his sword and thrust it upward in salute!

"Ave!" he cried. *"Ave et vale!"* How often his shout of "Hail and farewell" had rung across the arena! But it had been "hail" for him and "farewell" for the others. Now—

So close its wind fluttered his clothing and he felt the harsh kiss of the stone on his uplifted hand—so close the stone passed him by. Its weight struck the muted drumhead of the roof in fearful thunder, echoed a score of times by the frantic shouts of the fleeing guards. Wan Tengri felt a savage wrench at his ankles, then he was falling, too, plunging down atop that massive block that had crushed through the roof. For long moments, Wan Tengri was not sure he still lived. He lay stunned and empty of thought and feeling across the block, pulled through into the storehouse beneath. Perhaps there was a prayer in his brain, but he did not utter it consciously. Only his lips moved faintly, *"Christos."*

THE ACHING of his overstrained muscles set him stirring presently. He heaved up his body and there, in the shaft of faint light that poured through the breach of the roof, he saw the spear point embedded in the marble. It had pierced through the thick felt of his Mongol cloak, thrusting in between arm and side. And Wan Tengri, thrusting to his feet, laughed aloud. Dust roiled about him, deepening the shadows, but through it he could still hear the frightened flight of the guards. He was free—

He moved his feet, and scowled down in the darkness. They could move separately, but there was a great weight on each one. Still, he could walk. He lifted them carefully, clumping his groping way off through the shadows of the warehouse, rewinding the lariat about his waist as he went.

"I have to thank the All-High of the Kasimer for a pair of extra boots," he chuckled in the darkness. "They will serve to keep my feet warm!"

It was a toilsome thing to walk, and his body felt drained. His sword groped before him, and he clumped on, heavily. So it was he came presently to a door. It resisted his weight, and he lifted his

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incased foot and drove it at the panel. It splintered and the door swung wide, quivering. He laughed weakly again, staggered on. He was in the guard-room now, deserted save for an arrow-pierced man who had crawled there to die. Wan Tengri paused to sling a fresh quiver of arrows over his shoulder and labored on toward the door. The court was deserted, too, save by the dead.

"This wizardry has its economical aspects," Wan Tengri muttered to himself. "See how many lives were spared by my magic. If they had not fled, I must have killed them all!"

He peered about him uncertainly, then saw a small and twisted man step from a doorway across the width of the court. Anger growled in Wan Tengri's throat, and he flicked an arrow from its quiver, groped for his bow. Ahriman help him, he had left that good bow upon the roof!

"Come to me, thou who falsely claim the name of comrade," Wan Tengri rumbled. "Come, thou lion of valor!"

The man came forward at a run, and behind him darted a dozen other forms. They were like wolves, like jackals where the tiger has fed. As they darted forward, they stripped the dead of weapons—all save the crippled one whom Wan Tengri had helped. He ran to prostrate himself at Wan Tengri's feet.

"Master," he whined, "I did but go to summon aid. When the flame wind speaks, you must run—run like the wind itself, else the ground will open to receive thy feet. I called to thee, master, and ran—for help."

Wan Tengri smiled thinly. "It seems to me, my lion, that you used the magic of the wizards and vanished. Had I not menaced the very walls of Turgohl with my own enchantments, thou and thy jackals would have come too late! Come now, before the flame wind speaks again. By Ahriman, it's like a whirlwind I'd run in my new Kasimer boots—all in one place! Up with thee, my faithful comrade, my very prince of lions, and march. Have one of these, thy valiant guardsmen, fetch my great bow from the roof. And quickly, else my steel will try out the magic of thy heartbeat!"

The beggar beat his forehead in the dust in his protestations of gratitude and service. The stringy gray hair was matted to his skull with perspiration, and Wan Tengri saw that his left arm had been bandaged only hurriedly where an arrow had pierced it through. The man's legs were scrawny as a starving peasant's, and the great strength of the barbarian's arms could snap that crippled body like a straw.

"All right, Monkey-face," he said sourly. "I believe a third of what you say, which makes me a credulous fool. My bow—and a place to hide until I can change my boots!"

The man's shrewd brown face twisted up and there was so much malicious glee in the beady eyes, the wryness of the loose-lipped mouth was so comical that Wan Tengri threw back his head and made his laughter ring—until he remembered the flame wind. He cursed then, peering up at the sky where the stars were paling with the menace of the swift-footed dawn, and went stumping across the court while the monkey-faced thief shouted piping orders and skipped ahead to point the way. There was need for haste. Light, that enemy of thieves, would soon flood the city, and the hoofs of horses were ringing on a cobbled way. From their even rhythm, Wan Teugri knew that a troop of guards rode to the assault. He squeezed his broad shoulders into a narrow passage between two mud huts. Behind him, he caught the lipless whisper of thieves, the shuffle of their hastening feet. It would be death for any man caught in that shambles. It would be death for Prester John if he were tracked down. How horrible that death could be, he who had fought through the East had ample wit to guess. He spat contemptu-

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ously. They'd never take him alive for such woman's play as that! Had he not laid his plans, and were they not working swiftly? Already, the thieves' leader had sworn allegiance with his forehead in the dust. When he had cemented the entire band to himself with bonds they would not dare to sever, he would be ready to strike. Until then, he could bide his time—and hold his tongue.

MONKEY-FACE was fumbling with a great rock sealed into the wall of a mud hut, but his wounded left arm hampered him. Wan Tengri brushed him aside and leaned his weight against a stiffened arm upon the stone. It swung inward on greased hinges, and he eyed the opening dubiously.

"If these rat holes of thine grow smaller, Monkey-face," he said, "I shall have to seek other warrens."

It was a squeeze to pull his giant's bulk through and down the steep ladder that descended a well. The ladder quivered under his weight and his unfeeling feet fumbled and slipped on the rounds. Monkey-face jabbered just beneath him, guiding his steps in turn with quick touches of his deft fingers. At last, Wan Tengri emerged into a low passageway where a torch burned in a socket, and the wall threw back crystalline reflections. The tunnel was lined with glistening white, and for a dazzled moment he thought that they were gems.

"The old salt mines, master," Monkey-face gabbled. "The wizards have never learned of them. They go back to the old days when Turgohl was free, when a man and a king sat upon the throne—when we were free and the loot stuck for a while, at least, to a thief's fingers!"

It was a long way they wound through the old levels of the salt mine, but presently Wan Tengri emerged into a vaulted chamber hollowed out of solid salt. A half dozen slattern women crouched around a timid blaze whose smoke lifted straight upward. Stolidly, Wan Tengri slouched across the stinking cavern to a couch over which a shabby rug had been thrown. He dropped upon it and cast off his felt cloak, revealing the tunic and pantaloons of padded silk which had come with him all the long way from Chin. They were a rich golden color and, above it, his crimson hair and beard flamed like a sun. From this vantage point, he watched the thieves file into the cavern, a scant dozen ragged men with hunger-pinched faces and the furtive walk of jackals. Wan Tengri's nostrils distended in disgust, as he opened his silken tunic to scratch the pelt of his chest. So he was to overthrow the power of the wizards and the stout soldiers of their guard with this band of skulking scavengers!

Monkey-face hurried toward him with an earthen bowl which held a steaming mess. It stank of near-putrefaction, but Wan Tengri had eaten worse in his march across half the civilized world. He gulped it down, tossed the bowl aside.

"And is this all your brotherhood, apekin?" he demanded.

Monkey-face shook a mournful head. "To this low estate are we fallen, master, we who once were the rich and the great! Our halls were draped with the loot of caravans until the accursed wizards came and loosed the flame wind upon our men. They were roasted like a sheep on the spit!"

Deliberately, Wan Tengri began to hack at the earth that still cumbered his feet. "Now, that will change!" he promised shortly.

"But how, master, since jewels fly back to the hands of those who own them so soon as they discover the loss?"

Wan Tengri tossed the jeweled breast plates of Tsien Hui's slave girl carelessly to the couch beside him. "And

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is there any need that the owners should live to discover their loss?" he asked. "These wizards who have usurped your city, do you then love them so much?"

A thousand wrinkles showed when Monkey-face flashed his yellow teeth in a smile. "There speaks a man!" he cried. "But no wizard can be slain."

"Phagh!" Wan Tengri spat upon the earth. "Can a man breathe, then, with his throat slit?"

The thieves crouched on their heels about him, and sly eyes studied his face through the fringes of ragged hair. They nudged each other and cackled furtively. Wan Tengri eyed them with deliberate scorn. It was a weak and flawed weapon he must swing. Well, he would forge a better one!

"When night falls again," he said carelessly, "you shall lead me to the house of the chief wizard. We will see what happens when my steel kisses his throat."

"But, master, first we must find this wizard!" Monkey-face grimaced frantically in his effort not to stir Wan Tengri's anger. "No man knows who the leader is, nor, indeed, any of the Seven! Nor where they sleep and hide their riches! And their spies are everywhere."

Wan Tengri stretched himself out on the couch. "Do relieve me of my boots, Monkey-face," he said carelessly. "When I awake, we will find this wizard—in the Flame Tower. Let there be quiet!" He closed his eyes and, for a space, thoughts whirled fiercely behind his lowered lids. It was a task he had cut out for himself, but he was the man for it. Unknown wizards who whispered from the air and could not die? That was a superstition of fools. Under the proper touch of the steel, any man died! Soon, he would be master of this rich city—for the glory of Christos, of course. He rested his fingers against the bit of the True Cross, and a satisfied smile curled his solid lips. Monkey-face was hacking at the earth that incased his feet, but it did not disturb Wan Tengri. He slept.

IV.

WAN TENGRI seemed to place himself completely at the mercy of the thieving brotherhood, but his noisy sleep was light. If any one of that ragged crew had transgressed beyond the bonds of safety, he would have found a fury, and sudden death, upon him. No man who had lived through the wars, through the perilous adventures which had dogged Wan Tengri's trail, could have survived unless, even in sleep, his senses remained alert. But his bravery in ignoring danger and sleeping would impress these men, which was as it should be. They would need to lean on his leadership very heavily if ever he were to captain them against the wizards.

For a while when Wan Tengri awoke, which he did at intervals throughout the time he lay upon the couch, he listened intently to the whispers that, low-voiced, filled the cavern, and he became aware that nothing which happened in Turgohl was completely hidden from these thieves. They knew already how he had entered the city.

"—in a wool cart," one whispered. "There was blood found upon the floor. One of the spearmen—"

"The Mongol, Kassar, will face the judgment of Ahriman."

Wan Tengri was hard put to conceal the jerk of his muscles at that news. Now, by all the devils, these wizards were keen to find so soon how he had entered the city and to lay Kassar by the heels! He continued to fake his snores, but between them, he sent a whisper, lipless and piercing, across the cavern.

"Kassar shall be freed!"

He heard the startled, hushed cries of the thieves about him and, amid his fiery beard, Tengri smiled. It was as

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well that they should believe him, too, to have magical powers! But there was savagery as well as mirth in the movement of his lips. Kassar had dared things that he feared, as he dreaded not even death itself, to bring his blood brother into Turgohl. Could Prester John do less than go to his aid? There was no question in his mind. Ruthless he was, and ambitious, but no comrade would ever call to him in vain for succor. There would not even be the need to call. Besides, it accorded well with the plans of Wan Tengri! He would put the terror of Christos into these heathens and knit his small, vicious band more closely together.

So Wan Tengri slept and waked through the day. Finally, he rose and stretched himself to find Monkey-face grinning at his bedside.

"Master, we have news for thy ears," he chattered.

Wan Tengri smiled slowly. "When is the judgment of Ahriman?"

Beady monkey eyes widened, and the wrinkles chased themselves in mad patterns across his ancient face. "Now, surely thou are a wizard!" he whispered.

"Answer, fool!"

The thief prostrated himself in the dust. "Tomorrow, master, at the Hour of the Ape."

Wan Tengri nodded slowly. "Before that hour, Kassar shall be freed. Thou shalt find for me where he is held. Now, fool, the names of the wizards!"

The crippled little man with the hunched back ground his forehead in the dust. "Truly, master, that is a thing no man can say for certainty." He looked up quickly with his bright, malicious eyes. "One can guess."

Wan Tengri grunted: "Guess well, Monkey-face. Tonight, I fill the coffers of the brotherhood—and sharpen my steel on wizard's bones."

The thief shivered. "The guards hunt thee, master. Never have I seen such searching! And thy head, master, is like the eye of Ormazd for brightness. Better that thou hidest here for a moon until this search fades. Or, mayhap, a bit of dye for that burning beard of thine and thou couldst pass for a Mongol."

Wan Tengri combed his crisping beard with his fingers and laughed shortly. He was proud of his sun locks—and the eyes of all the thieves were upon him. "Let them find me—at their peril!"

With blunt, lazy fingers, Wan Tengri drew on his cloak and fastened lariat and sword belt about his waist, slung quiver and bow across his shoulders. Fresh deerskin boots were ready for his liberated feet, and he drew them on with infinite relish, felt the lithe strength of his leg muscles as he thrust his feet home. He caught up the jeweled breast plates stolen from Tsien Hui and tossed them into the midst of the thieves.

"If you cannot steal decent food, sell those to the money lenders and purchase food in the bazaars. Monkey-face, I am ready. Lead on—to the Flame Tower!"

"Master, I hear and obey!"

IT WAS through another twisting crystalline cavern that they made their way toward the night-darkened streets of Turgohl. The torches' red flame turned the saline walls to jewels of blood. Wan Tengri stretched out his great legs nad found himself lusting for the struggle ahead while Monkey-face pattered at his side, chattering.

"Master, would it be asking too much if thou didst not demean me before thy other servants?" he pleaded timidly. "My unworthy name is Bourtai."

Wan Tengri snorted. "Art not of the Bourchikoun, the gray-eyed men? Thy eyes, Monkey-face, are like bits of ice charcoal."

"Nevertheless, it is my name, master." The crippled thief scurried ahead, moving sideways like a crab to peer up beseechingly into the fiercely bearded

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face of Prester John. "Wilt thou not increase thy own stature by honoring thy servant with a name?"

Wan Tengri boomed out his great laughter. "Well enough, Monkey-face. Henceforth, before thy brethren, thou are Bourtai. Tell me of this Flame Tower and the wizard that dwells there."

Bourtai peered furtively behind him, sent his quick, birdlike gaze up a side shaft. "Not here, master," he whispered. "It is a thing no one knows—no one save the wizards and Bourtai." His sunken chest swelled a little and he struck a small, dirty fist against it. "I . . . . I stole into the temple of Ahriman and the god talked to me. We climb here, master. Let me go first, lest the guards be waiting. We must not lose thee, master. Thou art our freedom."

Wan Tengri's solid lips parted as he watched Monkey-face scramble up the wall, using knobs of salt as a ladder. He shrugged his quiver around between his shoulders. He was not so mad or careless as he would have these thieving rascals think. True, he would not fear to take on a half score of guards, but it was better to bide his time, to save his lightnings for the moment of need. And there was always the chance that a stray arrow might take him through the throat. Prester John was a man careless of death, but he thought that now it would be good to live. There was good fighting ahead and, at the end of the road, riches such as he had never dreamed. If he died—well, the gods took care of those who perished in their holy cause! And whether he fought in the name of Christos or Mithra or Ormazd who ruled the sun, they would honor a man who slit a few black wizard throats.

So, with the smile on his lips—and the blade of his sword between his teeth—Wan Tengri seized the knobs of salt that made a way upward and climbed into the darkness where Bourtai's cracked, small voice called to him. Presently, he emerged into a dark hole where, only faintly, he could make out heaped mounds of furs. The stench of the underclean hides, of rotting fat, plugged his nostrils, and there was the rich, sense-stirring scent of musk.

"This way, master," piped Bourtai. "This trapdoor is too heavy for thy servant's poor strength."

Wan Tengri grinned at this obvious flattery, but he minimized the strain of the load he lifted, doing it with one hand while his muscles shrieked at the burden. They clambered up into a mud-walled room where a flickering rosy light, as of flames, danced in through a high arrow slit.

"A warehouse, master," whispered Bourtai. "It is only from such as these that we can profit for a little while. For see you, if the loot is not missed, how can the wizards call it back? From its roof, we can look down upon the court of the Flame Tower."

ONCE MORE they were climbing, and presently Bourtai gestured Wan Tengri obsequiously to his side where he stretched out flat upon the packed-earth roof of the building to gaze over its low parapet. Wan Tengri crouched and peered up at the spire of the Flame Tower with its cap of gold. He caught his breath at the beauty of it, and then he stared down—and saw whence the flame light came. All around the base of that tower, and for a score of cubits in all directions, flames leaped upward from a moat in a frantic guttering dance. Red and white and purple-streaked, they swayed and quivered like ecstatic odalisques, throwing high brilliant arms into the air, lovingly caressing the tower; swaying back as if in sudden fright, then rushing all together in a new up-tossing of adoring hands of flame.

"Always, master," whispered Bourtai, "save only on one night, and then

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only so long as Ahriman speaks the prayer of the Mating Moon, the flames dance like this."

Wan Tengri grunted. If the chief wizard hid behind that shield, it would take a true and mighty magic to reach him. He thought dubiously of the things he had seen in far Hind where men had walked on glowing coals, and of the stories that the followers of Christos told—three children thrown into a fiery furnace to emerge unhurt. He shook his head dubiously. A man would need a very holy cause indeed to brave that heat.

"On what do those flames feed?" he demanded harshly.

"On the bodies of slaves, master," Bourtai whispered, as if those flames might hear. "And if not enough die each day, then they throw in living men. The flames like that, master."

Wan Tengri's brilliant gray eyes narrowed, and he scanned that tower with a soldier's mind, saw then the farther barrier he would need to pass. In the court beyond the heat of the flames, a great fountain threw up a spray like coruscating jewels, and ever in its jet there danced a great crystal ball, rising and falling, bouncing on the rising water as if it beat a deep rhythm for those dancing girls of flame. And around that fountain stood ranks of guards, seven ranks deep. Each row of them wore a different livery. Their tunics were crimson and blue and purple, cloth of gold and silver, and one was green, and the innermost rank wore robes of black that fell to their armored feet. Their heads and throats were bare, and the outermost rank faced outward, drawn swords in hand; but the other six ranks faced each other, two by two, and their naked swords rested each against the throat of the man who confronted him!

"What mummery is this?" Wan Tengri demanded roughly. "Were they frozen there in the midst of battle? Or will they kill each other all together, at a command?"

Bourtai giggled. "It is only that the wizards do not trust each other, master. Each of those liveried guards wears the colors of his master. Thus the guards of no single wizard can overpower the others and reach the crystal ball. If a man could learn the secret of that ball, the flames and the flame wind would die, and any man could reach the princess. The princess in the tower. So Ahriman told me in the temple."

With a thin smile on his lips, Wan Tengri whipped his great horn bow from across his shoulder and bent it with his knee to tauten the gut. "It is plain," he said, "a crystal ball is made to break!" Bourtai clutched at his arm, then prostrated himself. "In Ahriman's name," he cried, "do not do this thing! It would avail nothing until the Hour of the Swine on the thirteenth night of the Red, the Mating Moon!"

Wan Tengri pulled his eyes reluctantly from that bobbling crystal mark. It was a mark a good bowman might hit, and if he caught it squarely where the arrow would not glance, he might shatter it in a heartbeat of time. A princess in the tower—and since they guarded her so it was plain that somehow princess and tower held the key to this fabulous city of Turgohl.

"The Hour of the Swine," Wan Tengri whispered. "That would be the twelfth; the midnight hour. When is this Mating Moon of thine?"

Bourtai lifted an affrighted face and pointed where the Volapoi hills raised their black shoulders against the eastern sky. Over the tips of the fir trees, the bloodshot eye of a crimson moon was peering. "Master, this is the first night of the Mating Moon. When the thirteenth night falls—"

"Out with it," Wan Tengri ordered, growling. "Man, time is wasting! We have many things to do this night."

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FOR AN INSTANT, the glitter in Bourtai's eyes startled Wan Tengri so that his hand flew to the hilt of his sword. The twisted man still crouched upon his knees, but on the moment there was something so venomous, so deadly there that Prester John felt a coldness race through all his great body. It was such a chill as had struck him in the siege of Antioch when a catapult's great jagged stone had hurled him to the earth with its wind of passage.

"Thou small, stingless viper," Wan Tengri hissed, "I think it would be well if I snapped off thy head now!"

Bourtai's voice was a whine. "How, master, think you I know these things if I lied concerning Ahriman's temple?"

There was breathless waiting there on that roof in Turgohl. The whimper of the high flame wind seemed to fade and, through the silence, came the flutter of the dancing fires. Wan Tengri rolled his great shoulders, but his hand did not leave his sword hilt.

"How shall any sneaking jackal learn secrets?" he growled. "I think, my monkey-faced viper, that thou knowest at least one wizard. I think that thou didst lie concerning that."

Bourtai cackled softly. "Thou art shrewd, my master! It is true, what thou sayest. I did but seek to add a cubit to my stature in thy eyes."

"On with thy story, fool," Wan Tengri growled. He felt that the wing of the death demon had passed him by, yet still hovered there in the high air. Respect for this twisted leader of thieves touched him briefly. There was some mystery here—but there were greater mysteries to be solved. Bourtai was talking softly.

"This then, master," he whispered, "is the story of the princess in the Flame Tower. Under enchantment, she is kept as a little child in stature and in mind, though truly she knew many hidden things. She is the true ruler of Turgohl, but when the wizards came secretly from Taghdumbash, the roof of the world, they built this tower in a single night and threw the Flames of Kasimer about it. All the magic of the princess accomplished only this one thing, that the crystal ball should dance there in the fountain's perfumed spray and that, for the length of Ahriman's prayer on the thirteenth night of the Mating Moon, she should once more regain her full stature and mind."

Wan Tengri still regarded his small servitor warily, but he masked his suspicion under squinting lids. "There is no spell that cannot be broken," he said shortly. "What other secrets did Ahriman whisper in thy ear, which undoubtedly I shall crop within the hour?"

"Nay, master," Bourtai said humbly, "that I could not tell thee, were thou to crop my neck, too! That the spell can be broken, I doubt not, and I know that it must be done at the Hour of the Swine on the thirteenth day. Perhaps thy great magic—"

"Perhaps." Wan Tengri muttered. His eyes went calculatingly back to that bobbling crystal ball, and his fingers rested caressingly on his great horn bow. "Come. I shall return when the hour is ripe. But now my sword thirsts for wizard's flesh, and the coffers of the brotherhood are empty! Lead me to this wizard of whom you learned so many things. If such as thou can pierce his enchantments and listen to his secrets, dost think Prester John will do less?"

"Truly, thou art great, John of the Wind-devils," whispered Bourtai, and Wan Tengri felt an anger crawl along his muscles. He could not be sure, but there seemed mockery in the chattering voice of this small, twisted monkey of a man. When he had learned all Bourtai could tell, when Kassar was freed, there would be a time of accounting.

"Come," he ordered shortly. "Lead on."

Down the ladder and into the shaft

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Prester John grinned down at the fat Chinese. "They say you are a magician. Does your magic, then, hold strong against a good arrow?"

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of the salt mines, up again into a hut that gave on a crooked, muddy lane. "The Street of the Brass Beaters, master," whispered Bourtai. "We have not far to go."

Wan Tengri stood listening to the nearby tramp of a guard. That was no decurion's command. Tonight, they marched by scores. Wan Tengri smiled thinly. It was a tribute to his arms which he could not scorn. He marched on with a stiffer swing to his broad shoulders. By Ahriman, he had put the fear of Prester John into their very bowels!

As they reached a spot where three of the straggling streets strayed together, Bourtai dropped back to his side to point with an outthrust chin. "There, master, is the garden wall of Tsien Hui, the wizard."

Wan Tengri's muscles jerked and his fist knotted about the neck of the scrawny thief. "Liar!" he rumbled. "Fool, do you take me for a moonstruck dolt? Tsien Hui is not a wizard from Kasimer, but a sticky-fingered money lender from Chin. Last night"—laughter barked in his throat—"last night, I harried him naked through his harem. I wrested jewels from a slave girl he sent to bribe me. Think you your powerful wizards would permit such indignity?"

"Truly, thy magic is great, Wan Tengri," whined Bourtai, "yet what I tell thee is true. Unless his very life was threatened, Tsien Hui would not reveal himself, nor would any other wizard. Or perhaps his stars were weak and thine all-powerful."

Suspicion sprang up in Wan Tengri's mind again. It was true that he had succored this small, perverted imp and that the man had served him afterward, but Bourtai was sly. He was not above using Wan Tengri's strength for his own ends. Perhaps he resented losing prestige before the slinking thieves who followed his lead. Wan Tengri's head jerked up. The guard was coming this way. The clank and thud of their armored tread was louder, echoing like muted thunder between the close-pressing walls.

"Wait in the shaft by the Street of the Brass Beaters," Wan Tengri ordered. "If I find thou hast lied to me—"

"Nay, master; thou shalt tear out my tongue first." Bourtai wriggled in his fierce grip.

"Aye," said Wan Tengri, "thyself has named it."

HE SENT Bourtai reeling on his way with a thrust of his arm, took two long strides and leaped high to grasp the spikes atop Tsien Hui's wall. He tautened the muscles of his arms, drew himself straight upward until he could knee the crest. There was a cold smile in his gray eyes that was not echoed on his bearded lips. If Bourtai was convinced that this yellow weakling was a wizard, so much the better. He would fill the thieves' coffers this night, bind them to him with chains of wealth, as well as fear, before he went to rescue Kassar. This much was necessary to stiffen their limber spines, for an invasion of the dungeons of the Seven Wizards of Turgohl was not a thing to attempt lightly and alone.

Lightly, Wan Tengri leaped to the garden of Tsien Hui and crouched there while the beams of the Mating Moon spilled their soft red glow upon the high-twining vines and feathered heaven trees. The liquid murmur of a fountain lulled his ears and its perfume cleansed his nostrils. The tread of the guard was softened and the rhythm beat with his quick-thudding heart. There, the inner wall of Tsien Hui's house glowed opalescent in the purple gloom. He took two slow strides forward through the clusters of oleander—and threw himself frantically aside!

Out of the gloom, a fierce hairy hand had streaked toward his throat, and he caught the glisten of slavering fangs in

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a bestial face! As he leaped, his sword whipped out, singing, but he checked the quick sweep of the blade. The giant ape was held prisoner by a brass collar about its throat. It leaped up and down, clashing the metallic chain, thumping its drumlike chest, but no sound save the whistle of wind issued from the screaming mouth. Enchantment—or severed voice cords in the throat. Wan Tengri's lips twisted in a thin smile. He had been underestimating Tsien Hui.

Swiftly, his gaze combed through the tangle of the garden, and, here and there, he glimpsed the twin gleam of beast eyes in the dusk. He wove a way between the menace of a crouching, tawny tiger and the snapping jaws of a wolf, both straining at their chains. No sorceries here, though these were such protections as the Emperor of Chin himself might envy and they were strange in a money-lender's garden in far Turgohl. Wan Tengri, creeping toward where twisted vines, like coiling snakes, climbed the house wall, was remembering other things about Tsien Hui. It was from his hands that the jewels had vanished and, strangely, the guard had been summoned to his door. The old man himself had vanished like some jinni in an instant of time. Yes, there might be some truth in Bourtai!

Wan Tengri laid his great hands upon the vine coils and went up swiftly, hand over hand, toward the balcony that leaned over the garden. It was when he had taken his third grip upon the vine that he felt it move sluggishly under his hand! He was aware suddenly that the vine was cold as a snake is cold, and that titan muscles slid under the bark! A great soundless cry jerked open Wan Tengri's lips. The coils were lifting toward him! With a frantic thrust, he loosed his grip and hurled himself outward and down. His wide-strained eyes stared upward. Even as he fell, a wedge head dipped toward him, and he caught the glassy gleam of reptile eyes!

Wan Tengri fell on sprung knees and leaped backward. There was a breath of air against his face, a jerk in his tangled hair, and he dodged away from the sweeping claw of the leashed tiger! It was fortunate that he did, for the snake's gaping jaws snapped past his shoulder in the same instant. With the keenness of desperation, his warrior's brain weighed and estimated his dangers. His keen blade flicked toward the snake's extended neck and he hurled himself toward the walls of the house. The tiger and the wolf could not reach him there, and the serpent must turn upon its own length to strike. He felt the blade strike the reptile's throat just behind the head; strike—and bounce! The blade sang as if it had struck stone, and a hopeless cry welled into Wan Tengri's mouth. He strangled it there, flung his shoulders against the wall. There must be no sound, lest Tsien Hui be aroused and send new enchantments to ensnare him. The useless sword hung poised in his hand; the great bow across his back and its arrows pressed hard between his shoulders. Useless—all useless.

THE SNAKE threw its coils at him, but he braced his shoulders grimly against the solidity of the wall, dug his heels into the earth. The striking of the serpent's body bruised like the battering of a war club, but Tengri's giant thews resisted fiercely. Behind the angry glitter of his eyes, his brain was racing, calculating. His brain was his magic. By Ahriman, he would see if Tsien Hui's monsters could best the hurricane wrath of Prester John!

Ah, the snake was poised to strike again! No poison fangs there, but teeth that looked like the back-curving head of a Persian lance. Once those teeth fastened on a man, the coils would swiftly crush out even Prester John's flaming life. He braced himself, lifted his curving sword. It was a supreme slashing weapon, that scimitar. Every

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inch of its sloping edge was shaped to bite deep, but it had bounced—and it did have a point. It was the point Wan Tengri thrust forward, waiting while the snake swiftly tensed its steel muscles for the strike. The skin might be tough, but Wan Tengri thought the inside of that gaping, red throat might be pierced by true steel!

Wan Tengri did not attempt to strike. He braced his shoulder, his arm locked rigidly with the sword a curving continuation of that axis—and waited. The snake's head whipped forward with a speed not even the bow-sped arrows of Wan Tengri could squal. The sword point wavered—and the whole blade vanished! But it vanished down the throat of the giant enchanted serpent of Tsien Hui's garden!

Just in time, Wan Tengri whipped his hand away as the titan jaws snapped shut. He hurled himself aside, rolling, and saw the dripping, upthrust point of his sword jutting out from the serpent's spine! That frantic, dying body threshed mightily. The tiger, struck by a sideswipe of that blind tail, was hurled the length of its chain and died, quivering, with the breaking of its neck. The wolf cowered back the full length of its leash.

Wan Tengri, staggering to his feet, stood and stared with his chest heaving quickly. Slowly, his lips curved in a smile and his eyes lifted to the balcony. He would have to move swiftly before the lashing of the serpent's death throes aroused Tsien Hui. His sword he could not reclaim until the last quiver had left those brass-muscled coils. No matter. With a quick gesture, he freed and strung his bow, swung it about his neck. A run, and a high leap, and he gripped the low branch of a tree. It creaked and swayed under his weight and, with its rebound, he soared out into space with upreaching hands. He just gripped the railing of the balcony and his body thudded against the wall with a force that made his teeth rattle.

Wan Tengri was staggering when he leaped across the balcony and swept aside the gossamer curtains that screened a door. Like a woman's clinging hands, the stuff twined about his arm—but its strength was the strength of a man. With a violent, suppressed oath, he ripped his muscles against it. The curtains tore loose from their fastenings and he carried them with him as he leaped across the great chamber toward a silk-draped bed. From about his neck came the great bow, and an arrow leaped from his quiver to notch on the gut. A bound and Wan Tengri stood on the foot of the bed. The gut cord touched his ear.

"Move, Tsien Hui!" he whispered. "Move, and I'll pin thee forever to thy couch!"

The slit eyes of the man from Chin gazed up into Wan Tengri's distorted face. Yellow, long-nailed hands lay passive on the coverlets of silk and fur. "Art not satisfied, Barbarian?" he asked quietly. "I did not call back my jewels."

Wan Tengri's sharp laughter was like a wolf's bark. "But I have need of more jewels, Tsien Hui, and they tell me in Turgohl that thou hast the name of a wizard. Now, as a true son of Christos, it is my sworn duty to slit wizard throats. Since my sword has been swallowed by that living serpent-vine of thine, needs must use an arrow. I doubt not it will serve as well."

Tsien Hui said softly: "So thou hast slain the enchanted vine. Verily, Barbarian, you grow too troublesome." His eyes seemed to open more widely, and Wan Tengri could stare into their depths. There seemed to be some secret there which he must learn, which his soul must plumb in order to survive. His own eyes narrowed a little, then widened in answer to Tsien Hui's own. Was that glimmer of green fire in Tsien Hui's eyes—the secret?

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"YES," said Tsien Hui softly, almost drowsily, "you grow too troublesome, Barbarian, but I am too sleepy to deal with you properly now. You, too, are sleepy, aren't you, Barbarian? So, I permit you to sleep. Relax your bow, Barbarian, slowly, slowly."

Wan Tengri tried to shake his head to free his eyes of the compelling power of this sorcerer's gaze, and he could not. Rage swelled in him, and he tried to free his fingers from the bowstring to drive his arrow deep into this yellow face that mocked him with its thin smiling.

"You cannot release the arrow, Wan Tengri," Tsien Hui said softly, "and your arm is so tired. You cannot hold the bow taut any longer. Just relax it, Barbarian."

Wan Tengri tensed the mighty muscles in his body, fighting against that order which seemed to come from his own brain. He fought—and he relaxed the bow as Tsien Hui ordered! The yellow teeth of the sorcerer showed as his smile widened.

"Now, drop the bow, Barbarian, and step down from my bed. Yes, that's right. You will take three steps backward, Barbarian, and then you will await my pleasure, in the morning. As I tell thee, thou bit of offal, I am drowsy."

Wan Tengri stood three paces from Tsien Hui's bed, and his hands were empty of weapons. He did not know how this thing had come to pass, but it was true. He was defenseless, and that hateful yellow face was smiling at him from the bed. For a space of moments, or hours, Tsien Hui continued to smile, then the slant eyes closed, and Wan Tengri saw that the yellow magician slept. He knew dimly that he was under enchantment, that his muscles were fighting frantically just to move, to shift the position of a foot, to lift a hand—and it was no use, not use at all. By Ahriman, he was sleepy! He could even sleep standing up. Wan Tengri fought against the hundredweights that pressed down on his lids. He could not wait here. He had to carry loot back to the brotherhood; he had to free Kassar, who tomorrow would face the judgment of Ahriman. He had to do these things, but he was too full of sleep. The weights upon his eyelids won. Standing rigidly erect, almost within arm's reach of the wizard, Tsien Hui, the mighty Prester John fell into an enchanted sleep!

To Wan Tengri, it seemed that presently he was walking in this enchanted sleep, was moving amid great crowds of people. He heard shouts, or the echoes of shouts; he heard the fluting laughter of women, and over it all, dominating the sounds, was the heavy martial tramp of men and the wild beat of Mongol drums, the clash of cymbals and the blare of long brass trumpets. That faded and the choral counter-voices of men and women, like the hymns that Egypt's priests and priestesses lifted to the rising sun, flooded in and filled his brain. When it ended, he awoke.

For moments longer, the smiling yellow face of Tsien Hui seemed to float before his eyes; then it was gone, and he could see clearly. He stood alone in the midst of a great concourse, beneath a groined and vaulted ceiling that lifted into dim distance above his head. On either side were the twining, fluted columns, carved from ivory and alabaster and sweet-smelling cedar. About them writhed golden, fire-tongued dragons. Beneath them, the thick-pressed ranks of people were dwarfed. Wan Tengri's eyes followed the sweep of the columns and widened to the shock of the figure that filled the entire end of this great hall. A great, many-armed body rose from a robe of cloth-of-gold that glittered with jewels, and the face was a horror of burning blue and scarlet. Tusks thrust out between blood-dripping lips, and the horns that jutted

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from the temples were tipped in flame. He stood—*Christos, he stood before Ahriman for judgment!*

Weakness flowed through the marrow of his bones and a great cry swelled his chest. He held it down with an effort that made the veins swell in his temples and suffused his eyes so that he saw through a dancing, reddened veil. He was Prester John. No man, not even Ahriman amid his hell fire, should see him show fear. He clenched his giant's fists and became aware of the brass that manacled him. Slowly, his vision cleared and he looked down at his weathered, scar-wealed body. He had been stripped to a loincloth, and the thews of his legs, like his arms, were festooned with chains that tinkled like silvery bells to his every movement, like the silvery bells that graced the throat of bulls sacrificed to Isis. Every muscle stood out in rigid relief as he strained his wrists apart against the grip of those chains. They seemed so light, a mockery of captivity, yet his utmost strength served not to strain a link. Enchantment again. Ah, to Ahriman with all of them! They could do no more than kill him!

Prester John's fiery red head lifted and his crimson beard bristled in defiance. He set his gray eyes, under lowered brows, against the fire-dancing eyes of the god, Ahriman. The fragment of the True Cross lifted with the surge of his great chest.

"I await," his mighty voice boomed. "I await the judgment of Ahriman. And may the wind-devils who sired me fly away with you!"

A MURMUR ran over the waiting throng as the echoes of his challenge died out in the groined vaults above. Robed priests were filing out from black doorways and, like the soldiers who surrounded the enchanted fountain, their robes were of seven colors, and each file was led by a man in the livery of a different wizard. Despite the certainty of approaching death, Wan Tengri's lips twitched in a smile. Even here, in the temple of the Ahriman, the wizards did not trust each other. He wondered, absently, which of those priests were the men of Tsien Hui? His humor came to the aid of his courage. What was that Ahriman there but a fabric of man-made wood or stone, draped in man-wrought cloth-of-gold? It was true that men said the spirit of a god came to inhabit the figures men made in his worship. Only Christos forbade all that. Some of his followers had been crucified for smashing the little terra-cotta home gods of the Romans. It was comforting to remember that it had been the hands of men, and not the gods, that had punished the Christians for that.

Prester John jangled his wrist chains in time to the slow, chanting march of the priests, and they made a sound like light laughter. He saw that they were fastened to a block of stone in the floor. Despite their enchantments, the wizards were taking no chances with him! Wan Tengri allowed his eyes to roam over the waiting crowds. A saucy wench peered at him from behind an alabaster column; a brass-cuirassed guard glared at him from beneath his helmet's brim. From a litter, a wealthy merchant in his silks and furs lifted himself on a languorous elbow to peer beneath incurious lids.

A sudden rumble, like distant thunder, whipped Wan Tengri's eyes back to Ahriman. Sparks were flying from those awful eyes and, as Wan Tengri stared, those evil-tusked jaws began to champ. There was a wail of terror from the crowd. The priests were on their knees and, as one man, the waiting throng hurled itself prone, drummed foreheads in supplication upon the stone floor. Prester John's face paled, but he stood erect. He lifted his manacled hands to touch the bit of the True Cross about his throat..

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"I have given allegiance," Prester John muttered. "After my fashion, I have given allegiance. If a soldier's word means anything, hear my pledge now. Stand beside me, before me, behind me, and I'll bring a thousand, a hundred thousand men to bow before you. A hundred thousand, Christos, if I have to cut their throats to make them."

So Prester John stood straight on his braced legs and held his gray, frowning eyes on the fire-flashing face of Ahriman. Those rumblings of thunder were taking form, becoming words. Ahriman, it seemed, spoke the Mongol tongue:

"He shall wage the three battles and win honor—or death!"

A gust of smoke and a dart of flame put a stop to the words of Ahriman. A mingled cry, it seemed of protest, welled up from the priests, a muted cheer from the waiting throngs and, with a distant murmurous rumble, Ahriman fell silent. Wan Tengri felt tremors race over his body.

"It's the strain," he muttered to himself. "The strain in my muscles. Three battles, eh? *Phagh!* I could do it with one hand behind me—with your help, Christos. Thou hast heard and heeded. Did I say a hundred thousand men should bow? It shall be— Nay, a hundred thousand was the pledge. I'll keep my end of the bargain. Turgohl shall be the first—"

Prester John's eyes quested grimly, calculatingly over the throng climbing heavily to its feet. A curtain of cloth-of-gold swung before the awful statue of the god, and the priests were filing toward him, chanting as they came.

"The judgment of Ahriman is just. The judgment of Ahriman is unfailing. Great is the power of Ahriman and his reign shall endure a thousand years."

The march of the priests divided and passed by within arm reach of Prester John, and the chain tightened and tugged at his wrists. No man had touched them, but the ring that bound him to the stone was loosened, was sliding along to draw him forward between the ranks of the priests! Wan Tengri's eyes strained wide, and for an instant he pitted his giant thews against the brazen leash. It was as resistless as time. He relaxed and strode forward between the inclosing priests. His head was high. Draped in chains, he marched like a conqueror.

"Tell me, comrade," he said easily to the priest beside him, a dour man in a cowl of scarlet, "tell me, what may these three battles be, and when shall I wage them?"

The man scowled, and his black eyes slid sideways in their sockets to glare at Wan Tengri. "Thou hast cheated us of our just sacrifice, fool," he hissed, "but you will not survive the three battles! The battle of the beasts, the battle of men, and the battle of the gods. Aye! I shall laugh to see thy accursed blood flow!"

Prester John grinned with a flashing of his powerful teeth. "Why, that is as may be. There's apt to be a deal of blood before we're through, one way or another. Yet if I win, shaveling, I shall have honors! And the first honor I shall crave will be your ugly skull on a pole! It will serve to frighten children." He threw back his fiery head to set his booming laughter echoing, and heard a murmur from the crowd that might be applause.

It was in that same instant that the stone floor seemed to melt away beneath Prester John's feet and he felt himself plunging downward into blackness! The light snapped out in his brain!

V.

WHEN Wan Tengri stirred with a groan, that blackness was still close about him, tangibly pressing in upon his brain. And there was a stench that

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strangled him with horror, a dank sourness of underground pits where water dripped endlessly and starving rats gnawed on rotting flesh; where human animals were chained motionless to stone walls and Ormazd's sweet sunlight never reached. Rancid, filthy, nauseous—Wan Tengri knew before his eyes strained open in that utter darkness that he was in the dungeons beneath the Temple of Ahriman.

For a long, half-conscious moment, Wan Tengri fought against a surge of panic. He remembered the hatred that had glared through the eyes of the priest. Would they then dare to gainsay the orders their god had mouthed? A groan pushed against his teeth, and he tried to thrust up from the wet cold of the rocks on which he lay. Chains that seemed to crack his very bones dragged him back. He forced himself to relax all his muscles and lie there waiting, waiting—

Little sounds drove their way into his consciousness. Water dragged slow drops from the rocks near by. *Drip . . . drip . . . drip.* Unconsciously, he found himself counting between those splashes, and they were monotonously, insistently regular. *Drip.* The slow, thick pulse in his throat throbbed fifteen times, then *drip.* And fifteen pulse beats. Then *drip.* Frantically, Wan Tengri strained his ears to catch some other faint sound, anything but that liquid, dragging pat of falling water. He was thirsty.

The minute scamper of small claws as a rat flicked across the cell was a relief for a moment, and then horror. If those slimy beasts of the dungeons attacked him, he was helpless. They would know it. They were wise with a thousand generations of rats that had preyed on the helpless victims of these dungeons. The claws skittered nearer, flicked coldly across his thighs. Wan Tengri's muscles jerked, but the rat was gone. If it came back— *Drip . . . drip . . . drip.*

Out of the aching silence, a scream burst. It was torn from a human throat by agony, and it was formless, hoarse—the shriek of an animal in deathly pain. The sound clapped hollowly through the fetid air, then it broke with a retching groan. So the torture chambers were here, too. Wan Tengri found that all his body was straining against the chains. It was his utter helplessness that was sapping the marrow from his bones. He feared death no more than any other man, less than many. It was a thing a soldier learned to face. But the silence. And the water drip—

He forced his mind back in time, away from the contemplation of the priests of Ahriman and what might lie ahead. He was clinging desperately to the hope of those promised three battles. Beasts—and men—and gods. Perhaps they were only weakening his spirit for the encounter. Perhaps— To Ahriman with them all! He would be ready!

That tower amid its dancing flames seemed years away, and the roof on which he had lain beside Bourtai. Had that evil gnome sent him into this hell? Or had it been his own cocksureness when he had broken into the home of Tsien Hui? What did it matter—now. *Drip-drip-drip.* God, the sounds were wearing on his very brain! Seven wizards, Bourtai had said, who did not trust each other. When he got out of this— Self-mockery stirred in his brain and the ever-saving humor twisted his lips in a wry smile.

"Come, Prester John," he mocked. "Thou art a hurricane for strength. That priest of Christos said that faith moveth mountains. Heave up this mountain of thy flesh. What, nothing but a few chains?"

OUT OF THE darkness a voice spoke: "Wan Tengri? No, I am dreaming, Ah, *drip,* and may the devils of Ahriman—"

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"Kassar! Kassar, my brother!" Wan Tengri's voice burst joyously into the dark. "Thou art here? Then all is not lost! Together, brother, what can we not do?"

There was silence in the darkness, save for the heavy sound of labored breathing, until Kassar's voice came, hoarsely:

"Thou art chained, John of the Wind-devils?"

"Chained, brother," Wan Tengri admitted, "but at least we need no longer hear silence. They must come to us some time, and if it be death . . . why, we have seen death before."

Kassar laughed, sharply. "Aye, it will be easier now. I had hoped these dogs of wizards had missed you. That accused Bourtai—"

Wan Tengri's body tautened under the chains. "How say you—Bourtai? What Bourtai?"

"Him whom they call the All-High," Kassar said curtly. "The chief of the seven wizards of Kasimer. May Ahriman blind him and wither up his bowels! May Ahriman pierce his brain with madness!"

Wan Tengri's eyes, staring blindly up into the darkness, narrowed in thought. That withered cripple of a man, burrowing in the salt mines and companion of filthy thieves, the All-High? Nay, surely, this was some other Bourtai. Or perhaps an ass who wished to wear a lion's skin for an hour—yet he could remember a moment when he had almost feared this same rat of the salt mines; he, Prester John! And a wizard could use such spies as those slinking thieves.

Wan Tengri spoke heavily: "Yet I thought these wizards were unknown, that they hid behind enchantments. One told me that this same Tsien Hui, the money lender, was a wizard and, in truth, he must be, since he turned my blood to water and froze me into an enchanted sleep when I had an arrow notched to drive to his yellow heart!"

"In this accursed city," Kassar told him fiercely, "all men are wizards since the black thieves came from Kasimer. And this same Bourtai may have lied. He came to the *yurt* of the khan asking aid to drive out his six brothers in sorcery and promising many things. My brother, the khan, drove him from the *ordu* with whips. The khan worships the One True God and does not love a wizard. Now surely, had he been the All-High, this Bourtai would have laid a curse upon my brother. It is a thing I do not understand. But this I know: I shall die soon. It is written."

"What is written, no man can avoid," Wan Tengri agreed soberly, "yet I do not feel that death is near. Not since I have found you again, my brother. And I have made a vow which surely I must live to fulfill."

The hours dripped past in the darkness and no man came near them, nor was there any sound. The torture of thirst grew upon them there in the dungeon until the plash of the falling drops was an agony almost too great to be borne. Yet presently, when they were replete with hopeless talk, Wan Tengri forced sleep upon his aching brain, nor did he awake until the far whisper of foosteps struck like thunder into his consciousness.

"Kassar," he said quietly, "I think they come for us."

"For me," Kassar said, with sure knowledge. "Farewell, brother. I would I could have seen thee fight again."

"Nay, we shall meet!"

"If it is written," Kassar agreed calmly. "Or perhaps when I return in new flesh. Surely, we will know each other! Until then, my honor is safe is my blood brother's hands."

"It is safe," Wan Tengri told him curtly. "Nor will I forget that it was for me you came to this wizard's hell. It was my blood that snared you. What

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The little thief whined excuses. "Aye, Lord, thieves' slop, but the jewels are vanished, and this be all we have."

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my blood can do to free you shall be done."

He could catch the red glisten of torchlight on the damp walls and the footsteps came steadily nearer. Presently, the glare of the smoking flares blinded his dark-accustomed eyes, and afterward, when he could see, there were seven priests in their seven-colored robes standing at the gaping mouth of the cell. Wan Tengri could see now what he had not guessed before, that Kassar swung by his thumbs from a hook in the ceiling, and that his face was channeled deep by pain! His own mouth twisted in fury.

"Ha, shavelings!" he cried. "This man is my blood brother. Take me in his place, and give to him the right of the three battles. You will see such fighting as will please even Ahriman himself!"

Kassar said steadily: "Let be, brother."

The shavelings made no answer to Wan Tengri's curses. They stepped over his chained and helpless body to drop Kassar from his torture rack, and afterward, in chains, they led Kassar away while Prester John sent his raging fury echoing after them. The gleam of torches died and the faint fall of their feet, and afterward the silence came back more heavily than before.

WHEN, from the dark, a voice whispered, Wan Tengri did not answer. It was some trick of his brain, he thought, some illusion conjured out of his intense need. But the voice came again:

"Wan Tengri, thy turn comes next. Canst hear?"

Prester John swore raggedly. "I hear, thou skulker! Free me, Bourtai, Monkey-face! Kassar—"

"Nay, no man can help Kassar," came the faint whisper of the voice. "Nor can I free thee. The rocks between are too thick even could I break those enchanted chains. But listen, Wan Tengri. When you enter the arena, look for the portal of the scarlet ones. Behind it, a swift horse will wait. A quick and valiant dash will win you through."

Wan Tengri glowered into the darkness. "First, I have a score to settle with those same priests," he said thickly.

He caught the faint echo of Bourtai's giggle. "It would be worth the seeing. Hark, master, they will trick thee out of thy honors, for it is written that if a man shall win the battle of the beasts, and the battle of the men, that these priests may fight against thee in the battle of the gods. Yet if a man can win there, too—"

Wan Tengri stirred restlessly and his chains made their faint silvery music. He cursed. "A curse on thee, rat-face! Speak out, even though it try thy rat's courage to the breaking! If a man can win the battle of the gods, what then?"

"Before the god dies, master, ask a question. Dying, the god must answer. Ask this: *How may one man rule Turgohl?*"

"Aye," Wan Tengri laughed sharply. "I will ask!"

The cackle of the thief sounded faintly: "Yet it might be wiser to mount the horse and flee. In seventeen years, master, no man has lived to ask that question, and there have been many to try those three battles. Many, master—many."

Wan Tengri swore harshly and presently called a question, but there was no answer. Bourtai had gone his rat's way through the warrens under the city and there was nothing left save waiting, and the silent darkness, and the tormenting drip of the water. And Kassar—where was Kassar? There was no answer to that question, and presently, with a shuffle of sandaled feet and the bloody glitter of their torches, the priests of the seven wizards came back. Their leader, in scarlet, stooped to touch the chains and Wan Tengri

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felt them relax. With a great bound, he was on his feet—then his lips twisted in grim mockery. He was free of the earth, but not free of the chains. Still they clamped wrists and ankles and, once more, the ring to which they linked him glided irresistibly along the floor stones. Wan Tengri followed.

It was a long course they traced through the stench of the dungeons. It seemed longer to Wan Tengri. He walked with a feral lightness of stride, and there was an eager forward thrust to his shoulders. Bourtai's words had faded almost from his mind. He knew only that battle lay ahead and that, if he survived long enough, he would have his chance at these cowled and scowling priests who had inflicted torture on Kassar.

Presently, the stones of the wall ahead squealed on a pivot, and the hot brilliance of sunlight slashed into Wan Tengri's eyes. It brought pain like the touch of white-hot iron, but it was welcome. His body seemed to suck up the warmth of the sun; the hot odor of spilled blood on sun-baked sand was clean after the fetor of the cell. Just beyond the creaking stone portal, Wan Tengri paused while his narrowed eyes adjusted themselves to the glare, while the heat baked the damp ache from his bones. Dimly now, he could make out the multicolored crowds that rose, tier on tier, from the circus arena. There were seven gateways besides the one from which he had come, and their barriers were tinted with the heraldry of the Seven Wizards. Guards and priests in partisan colors were ranked before them.

A ROAR from many throats assaulted his ears, and Wan Tengri's fiercely bearded lips moved in a slight smile. *"Ave et vale,"* he muttered. Yes, he had heard that cry before in the arena at Alexandria! His eyes were questing more rapidly, seeking some trace of Kassar. When they found him, a savage shout rang like brass in his throat. In the midst of the arena, rose an altar block, and it was across this Kassar lay, but his arms hung downward in the laxness of death, and his twisted face, inverted over the altar's edge, told terribly how he had died.

Fiercely, great arms reaching out hungrily, Wan Tengri whirled toward the priests—and they were gone. The great stone door had swung shut. It was not until that moment that he realized the chains were no longer about his wrists and ankles. They lay in a glittering, brassy heap upon the ground at his feet. He snatched them up, a metal flail in his fist, swung around to face the arena. He had no thought of death, or of anything save Kassar—and that, in his third battle, he would face the priests of the Seven Wizards who had decreed this thing!

Slowly, on tense legs, Wan Tengri stalked forward across the black, burning sand. His red head blazed in the sunlight, and there was a stiff, challenging roll to his shoulders. In his right hand, he swung the brazen chains. The burning of the sand was good to his naked soles. His nostrils flared to suck in the hot battle smells he knew so well. He had no doubts. He would live to avenge the honor of Kassar!

Still no enemy rushed to face him. The battle of the beasts, that was first. Well, he was ready. Below the altar where Kassar's corpse lay, Wan Tengri paused to stare up at the dead face of his friend. He could see how horribly he had died, his belly ripped open while he lived and his entrails spilled out for an augury. What bloody prophecy had they read in the vitals of this man who was his brother? Wan Tengri's bearded lips parted in a savage smile. They should have read their own doom! If his valor had needed a spur, he had it now.

Wan Tengri whirled to face the white

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blur of faces that lifted tier on tier from the high barrier of the arena, and his voice boomed out, sullen as the sea in storm.

"Hear, you men and women of Turgohl," he cried. "For each drop of blood spilled from this, my brother's, veins, five lives shall answer! And if still his blood cries for vengeance, five hundred lives shall not make up the sum. Prester John had spoken!"

A breathless silence hung over the banked crowds. They might have been dead men watching. Then a trumpet blasted and a murmur as of rising wind swept them and, behind him, Wan Tengri heard the snarl of a starving beast. He sprang a full three yards forward, whirled to land lightly, facing the sound. In the base of the altar, a door had swung open and, in that square of darkness, there crouched his gaudily striped opponent for the battle of the beasts, a tiger.

For an instant, the beast hunkered close to the sand, blinking its great gleaming eyes against the brilliant light. Then it sighted the man, and its saber-fanged jaws parted in a roar that dwarfed the multiple voice of the mob. Wan Tengri, poised lightly on the sand, stood motionless to wait the charge. The brazen chain that was his only weapon swung lightly against the taut muscles of his thigh. Before this, he had faced the charge of the tiger of the plains, when the month-long Mongol hunts reached the *gurtai* and the circle of the drive was closed for the slaughter. But always then he had carried a lance in his hand and his keen sword hung ready at his side. Yet there was keenness rather than fear in his alert gray eyes, and the smile still curved his solid lips.

Three slow, crouching steps, the tiger had taken forward, belly close to the ground. Now the haunches were setting their muscles for the charge. The great silken tail was stiff as brass, save that its black tip twitched just a little. And still Wan Tengri did not move. He could feel the breathless waiting of the crowd. The little breeze that had brushed the arena was quiet in sympathy—and Wan Tengri waited.

The mask of the tiger contracted. Its roar burst out, deep and hoarse, a terrifying weapon in itself. Wan Tengri's throat opened in an answering shout of defiance and, as the tiger released the taut springs of its thighs, launching into the air, Wan Tengri charged! His forward leap disconcerted the beast in the moment of its attack. Prey did not behave thus. Prey fled from beneath outreaching talons. The powerful forelegs of the tiger were spread wide, the six-inch claws reaching for a grip that would rend a man's head from his body, yet its charge was half broken. It twisted in mid-leap as Wan Tengri feinted toward his right. It was no more than a sway of his swiftly lunging body, yet it served its purpose, and when he flung himself violently to the left, crouching low beneath the outward sweep of those deadly talons, the tiger could not reach him. How closely Wan Tengri had calculated even he did not guess until he felt the brush of the beast's silky foreleg across his chest as he pivoted. Wan Tengri's right arm was winging through the air. The brass chain caught the glint of the sun in a golden streak of fire, and then the manacles struck home in the tiger's face!

For a breath of time, Wan Tengri was motionless, then he allowed the impetus of his giant's blow to carry him forward, across the tiger's flank. The beast roared out a gust of pain and fury and, in the instant it landed, whirled and pounced on the spot where a moment before the man had stood—and Wan Tengri was not there. Once more, just beyond the reach of the beast's claws, he swung his brassy flail. He had a breathless glimpse of the snarling mask as he struck the second time, then

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he was running across the arena with great leaping strides. He heard the howl of the tiger and the vicious snapping of its teeth; caught the violence of its bounding feet as it struck the earth.

THERE WAS no time to look behind him. Five long strides Wan Tengri took, then pivoted on a single thrust of his stiffened left leg and doubled aside from his trail. The tiger blundered on, roaring, tearing up the black sand in clouds, a tawny fury, a maddened, slaughterous beast—but almost helpless. For Wan Tengri's flail had struck true and both those amber eyes were blinded. Its own blood ran down into its nostrils to cloud the natively weak sense of smell as still it sought its prey. The tiger's roars shook the air, but the sound was beaten down, submerged in the frantic applause that burst from ten thousand human throats. It struck the tiger with terror. Blindly, it cringed to the sands, snarling in its throat but cowed by this greater ferocity of the human beast.

Wan Tengri checked for a moment, poised on his toes, then flung himself forward in a furious sprint. There was grimness on his face. That beast might be cowed, but there was still death for a dozen men in those saber claws and awful teeth. Yet the tiger must be finished. Without doubt, there would be more beasts loosed upon him. This terror could not be free to rend when he needed all his wits and strength for another battle. Straight toward the tiger he ran, and still the brazen links swung from his fist. He leaped high into the air—and landed astride the tiger's back!

Behind the powerful forelegs, his knees clamped home, locked beneath the beast's belly. In the same instant, he had snapped the brazen chain beneath the furry throat. His fists locked on the links and, with all the power of his mighty shoulders, he strained upward on the chain, twisting it, knotting it behind the wicked head. In the first instant of his leap, the tiger sprang high into the air, all four claws striking out at once. It fell on its side, rolled frantically—and made no sound.

Wan Tengri's breath was driven out of him by the savage violence of that leap, but his legs clung with bitter strength to the hold that made the difference between life and death. Both hands were locked in the chain and, while man and beast rolled and tumbled on the ground, he twisted and twisted again the garrote knot he had tied, strangling the tiger. Sunlight and blackness wheeled in his brain. Muscles like brass quivered and jerked beneath his legs, and he was pounded on earth again, and yet again, until there was no vision in his eyes, no breath in his body—but the tiger made no sound.

He could feel the frantic pumping of those mighty lungs. The hammer of the tiger's laboring heart thudded against his left thigh. That pounding became swift as the drum of horses' racing hoofs. It became a war club that almost battered Wan Tengri's desperate grip loose. Then, it began to slow, and the struggles of the tiger slowed, too. A final, frantic spring that tossed Wan Tengri a dozen feet, and the tiger leaped convulsively and was still.

Wan Tengri staggered to his feet. The arena was wheeling about him and his breath surged in his chest. Roar upon roar of applause beat upon his eardrums. He sought for and found the motionless body of the tiger and moved toward it on feet that seemed strangely numb beneath him, but already his keen brain was working. In his struggles with the tiger, he had approached within a half dozen paces of the scarlet gate. While he had fought, the scarlet-clad guards and the priests had ducked behind the brass grating that closed the exit, but now they were filing back. Beyond them, Bourtai had said, a horse would be waiting. But Wan Tengri's

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resolution was already formed. Escape waited there, just beyond these cowardly fools in red. Presently, he might claim it, but first he had a score to pay. His eyes swung toward the altar where dead Kassar lay. The door in its base was open, and this time it was two black-maned lions that paused, bewildered, on the threshold! Bitter laughter stirred in Wan Tengri's dry throat. No wonder that, in seventeen years, no man had survived the three battles!

With the swiftness of an arrow flicking through a beam of light, he had made his plan. He stooped over the carcass of the tiger, and the bronzed flesh of his shoulders corded and rippled as his mighty muscles came into play. An instant he tensed there, then the tiger was lifted high over his head. In the same instant, he took a quick running step and heaved it—straight into the faces of the red guards!

THE SAME leaping stride that had hurled the beast sent Wan Tengri racing toward them. There were muffled shouts and a hurried attempt to dodge. One man futilely snatched out his sword. Then the great tawny hulk of the tiger struck among them. Two men went down screaming. The man who had drawn his sword tried to leap under the carcass, tripped and sprawled full length on the sands. Even as he hit, Wan Tengri was on him. His knees gouged into the taut, arched back. His two hands locked beneath the chin. An explosive release of the power in his body, and the guard's thin scream quavered out, strangled and cut short when his neck snapped.

With scarcely a pause, Wan Tengri snatched the man's heavy, curved sword from the sand and was lunging across the arena. Behind him, he heard the fierce shouts of the scattered guard and a sharp command as the captain closed their ranks. Wan Tengri laughed as he ran.

"You will get your chance presently, you who call yourselves men! After the Battle of the Beasts—"

The lions had sighted him and were crouching out from the darkness of the doorway. Their sides were gaunt with starvation, and there was white slaver on their fangs. They swung their heads heavily from side to side and a coughing roar begin in the chest of the larger beast. Wan Tengri did not check his race across the arena. He answered that bestial challenge with a shout that rang against the crowded ranks of the amphitheater.

For an instant, the two beasts crouched, undecided in the face of this man who charged with a scream as savage as their own. The smaller lion cringed back against the altar base, but, after that momentary hesitation, the second, larger beast roared again—and charged to the attack. Straight at each other, across an ever-narrowing stretch of the black sand, man and beast raced. In silence now, a silence that gripped the waiting crowd, that stopped breath in their throats for a timeless pause. Then, with a final, vaunting roar, the lion launched itself into the air. Its claws caught gleams of light, reaching for the taut, rendable skin of the man.

Using the speed of his charge, Wan Tengri swerved aside as he had leaped from the tiger's path, and this time, when his arm swung, it carried keen, murderous steel. It was not so fine as his own lost scimitar, but with the skill of a warrior's arm, he drew it home as the curving edge bit into flesh and bone. The lion dropped limply to earth, and did not stir. Its almost-severed head sagged, curiously limp. Its severed spinal cord brought death without a quiver!

With that stroke, Wan Tengri spun on his heel. He made a complete turn and, as the maneuver finished, he was charging down upon the second lion! For a moment only, the beast stood against the screaming challenge that

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Wan Tengri sounded, then it turned tail and slunk back into the darkness from which it had come. Laughter mingled with the shout of approbation that roared from the mob and, from the topmost rank, a blast of trumpets sent their brazen notes across the tempest of sound. The door in the base of the altar swung shut and Wan Tengri stood, an erect statue of bronze, gleaming and metallic with sweat, against the white alabaster. Greedily, he sucked air into the barrel of his chest. His arms swung ready at his sides and, once, he lifted the sword point to weigh its balance in his hand. There was a frown furrowing his forehead. It would serve.

His brain was empty of sensation. There was no weariness in him. He was warming to the slaughter. A second blast of the trumpets beat upon his ears, and his fiery head pivoted, his red beard thrust out fiercely. That Battle of the Beasts was ended; the Battle of the Men about to begin. A contemptuous smile curved the straight, stiff line of his mouth. Marching toward him were seven fools in motley, seven guards who wore each the brilliant livery of his master. But the one who wore scarlet was more eager. There was a thrust to his shoulders, and a stiff determination to the way he carried his head. Wan Tengri nodded. He dragged the flat of the blade along his thigh, cleansing it of beast blood. There would be blood enough presently, and it was slippery stuff when it trickled down to wet a man's palm on the hilt.

On came the seven, sun glinting on cuirass and helmet, on the embossed shields they slung on their arms. Wan Tengri's eyes were narrow with calculation. One advantage he had, and one only. A naked man could move more swiftly than a soldier cumbered with armor. He would deal with them—if there were no enchantments. He stood, solidly braced on his feet, to await their coming. As if he intended to stand as firm as that alabaster altar. He could see the grim set of those clean-shaven faces. *Phagh!* They looked like priests. Wan Tengri spat contemptuously on the sand. As if he had given a command, the seven swords flashed out of their scabbards and the men formed a semicircle to hem him against the altar base. Slowly then, cautiously then, they paced forward, shields ready on their left arms, sword points reaching—

Wan Tengri spat again. "Red," he said deliberately, "must be the color of cowards here!"

With a furious shout, the scarlet guard hurled himself forward. His curved sword glittered aloft in a high arc. Wan Tengri moved like the lithe leap of a tiger. He made no effort to ward the blow. As he darted forward, he thrust out his sword like a spear, point toward that eager, shouting throat. Then a cry rose futilely to the lips of Prester John. Enchantment, by all the curses of Ahriman! His sword, the valiant sword that had sliced off a lion's head at a blow—had changed to a serpent in his fist!

VI.

PRESTER JOHN could feel the cold, writhing muscles of the serpent as it twisted and coiled in an effort to sink fangs into his hand. There was a triumphant shout in the throat of the red guard, and his glittering blade started its downward swing at the fiery unprotected head. The other six men were pivoting, forming two ranks of three each to crush him between the vicious tongues of their swords, beneath the weight of the shields. Death was very close; death by enchantment.

Prester John had fought coolly and with calculation up to this moment, but now he felt surging through his veins the joyous battle rage that had earned him his terrible name. He shouted, a hoarse and inarticuate challenge. His

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right arm circled over his head and struck like the lightnings of that same hurricane whose name he bore. Straightened by the fury of that swing, the snake's head snapped against the face of the red guard! There was a thin, rising shriek. The man's sword faltered in its lethal sweep and, bounding on unshod feet, Prester John ducked under it and was behind his enemy.

He did not check there to finish the man from behind, but with two great leaps was beyond the swift closing of those twin ranks of death. The black guard tried to block his escape with a long leap and a flickering thrust of his sword-point, but his armor weighed him down. His feet lifted heavily from the ground, and Prester John flashed past, checked and flung the serpent with its shattered head squarely at the scowling darkness of the black guard's face. The man's shield came up to ward it, and Prester John heard a clash as of metal striking tempered metal.

There was no time to think of the meaning of that sound, but the memory lingered in Prester John's mind as he hurled his bronze-gleaming body into action. While the black guard was blinded by the swift lifting of that shield, Wan Tengri leaped in past the groping of the outthrust sword point, and his two hands locked on the man's wrist. He used the impetus of his violent charge and the towering strength of his brass-thewed body—and he used the wrestling skill he had learned among the Mongols. He wrenched the black guard's sword arm over his shoulder and, with a smooth forward sweep of his trunk, lifted the man clear of the ground and hurled him squarely on the sword and shield of the next guard!

In an instant, he had scooped up the sword of the black guard and had taken a half dozen swift leaps in retreat. He whirled then to peer back at his enemies and his sword made a whistling arc about his head.

"What, do you delay?" he cried, and mocked them with his deep laughter. "Has something robbed your hearts of blood? Or are your feet planted to the ground by enchantment?"

It was only then he saw that the red guard lay motionless while blood from beneath his throat was drunk eagerly by the thirsty sands. The guard in silvery livery was wrestling to free his sword, deep-buried in the body of the black. So only four men gripped shield and sword and ran heavily to oppose him. Prester John smiled to see them come so weightily to the attack. The muscles in his thighs felt taut and eager and laughter worked in his throat. He could hear the constant roaring of the arena crowds and, carelessly, he turned his back upon the approaching soldiers and lifted his captured blade in salute.

"A moment more," he cried, "and I will show you some real waging of battles. Trumpet in your gods!"

That gesture almost cost Prester John his life. As he swung about, a heavy dagger flickered past. He felt its cool, stinging kiss upon his cheek, and the blade tangled with his fiery, shoulder-length hair and clung there. He saw that the golden guard had thrown it.

"Well thrown, fool in gold!" he cried. "For that, I will kill thee last!" He dashed the warm blood from his cheek, and his left hand wrapped about the dagger hilt. The four were almost upon him. In two leaps, he had turned their left flank and was charging, with a warning roar, upon the silver guard who still wrestled with his corpse-locked sword. The man saw him coming and, with a final frantic wrench, freed his weapon and fell on guard, shield protecting belly and chest.

JUST OUT of his reach, Prester John checked and saw the sword swing up for a death stroke. John flung himself forward—and something gripped at his feet to plump him awkwardly to his

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knees! Desperately, his sword reached out, cutting edge uppermost. Its tip flickered across the armor-bare armpit, and red blood gushed to answer the caress of the steel. Sword toppled down from nerveless fingers and the arm dropped like a stick. The guard struck out fiercely with his shield, but his strength was pouring from him with the red staining of his silver tunic. His knees buckled and he groveled, dying, within reach of Prester John's hand.

Pallor touched the cheeks of Prester John. The blood from his cheek dripped from his fiery beard to dabble his swelling chest. He thrust fiercely to his feet —and they were sunk to the ankles in sand! He wrenched at them and, with a gasp of relief, he felt them tear free of the grip of the earth—but at his next stride he sank ankle-deep again! Even more heavily than the armored men he moved with this new accursed enchantment. Yet his lips could curve in his battle smile! Laboriously, he turned to face the charge of the four guards who remained alive. Glittering in their brass, resplendent in their tunics of blue and green, purple and gold, and with grimly confident smiles on their lips, they came in steadily. Sword points gleamed beneath the rims of their shields.

Prester John took two slow backward steps so that he stood once more against the altar. He made an awesome figure with the red sword in his hand, with his bloody beard and the smeared gleaming trunk of his body and, though ankle-deep in the black sand, still he towered above his four enemies. They were coming in steadily, side by side, a semi-circle of death in brass and steel. The crowds were silent and the burning pressure of the sunlight struck dazzlingly from the gleaming white of the altar, framed the bronze Barbarian in a halo of exquisite flame.

"Come, my fine slaughterers," Prester John said gently. "Come and let me kiss thee with steel."

There was an answering smile on the faces of the men, but they were wary with death and there was grimness in the taut lines of their cheeks, a fierce keenness in their watching eyes. Prester John's smile widened. They were close enough. His sword flickered toward the face of the blue guard. The shield came up—and Prester John's left hand threw the dagger! Straight and true, it drew its silvery line through the metallic sunlight and grated home under the edge of the cuirass. Its keen steel was buried to the hilt in the guard's thigh joint where a great artery pulsed close to the skin.

With a scream, the blue guard pitched forward, doubling, and he lashed out in a frantic side stroke with his waiting sword. Forgetful of the restraining sand, Prester John tried to fling himself aside and, too late, swung a fending blade. There was the rasp of steel, but when Prester John's shoulders struck the altar, there was blood upon his thigh. Fury bellowed from his throat. Heedless of the restraining sand, he flung himself upon the three guards who remained. His sword clashed on brazen shield. His shield severed under the stroke. The purple guard leaped backward. Green and gold closed in from two sides. Their swords flashed high. In a great circle about his head, Prester John whirled his blade. The golden crest leaped from a helmet and that guard's sword shattered in the air, but the second man's blade was under, slashing home. Prester John dropped to one knee and shrank aside. His sword cut back at the guard in green, and the man's fist, still gripping savagely the hilt of a sword, bounced on the ground.

From a half dozen cubits away, the purple guard hurled his dagger. There was no time to dodge, but the skill of Prester John, whose sword had severed arrows in mid-flight, swung his steel in exquisite timing. The dagger hissed on harmlessly to ring like a bell against the

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altar stone. And now, purple guard and golden drew back while the man in green gripped the blood-spurting stump of his arm and staggered off across the black sands. Somewhere, a trumpet blared and an arrow flicked from the barrier. The green guard groaned with the bite of the shaft, pitched to earth, and the twang of the bow, coming lately, marked the grinding of his face into the sand.

PRESTER JOHN, surging once more to his feet, smiled bitterly. It was a stern discipline that held the guard. They must triumph—or die. Gold and purple guards were rearming from the bodies of slain comrades, and Prester John moved toward them with ponderous, ankle-deep steps. The guards hovered back, reluctant to close, and twice the swift sword batted aside flung daggers. From the barriers, a trumpet sounded warning of more disciplining arrows. Pale-faced, the men glanced toward the sound, then gripped their swords in desperate hands and came forward to meet Prester John.

He did not check his march. With each step, his mighty thighs flexed and the muscles leaped like living serpents beneath the flesh. And at each step, the thirsty black sands drank of his blood. There was no smile on his mouth, and his teeth gleamed fiercely through the fire bristle of his beard. He stooped once to snatch up a dead man's shield, and once more he was aware of the timeless, blood-hungry waiting of the mob. The crowd recognized that tricks and flight were through. The odds were even for Prester John, two men to his mighty strength. No quarter, no more delay. The guards sensed that bitter threat and stood unmoving, shields poised. The man in purple shifted his grip on sword hilt a little. Prester John saw the light quiver on its point. Five cubits' distance from them, Prester John paused.

"Man in gold," he said softly, "I promised you should die last for that shrewd dagger throw of thine. Purple man—"

No man could see the tensing of Prester John's muscle that hurled the shield from his left hand. It was as sudden as the release of a bowstring. Like the twang of the gut, too, was the clash of the shield striking into the helmeted head of the golden guard! And its force was the force of the hammer of the gods! The guard pitched sideways, staggering to the earth, and Prester John tossed his war shout to the vault of the heavens, tore his feet from the sand and hurled himself upon the purple guard!

For an instant, steel rang on brass, clashed and slithered against another blade. For an instant, heavy-footed men stood, slashing, face to face. Then the lion roar of Prester John's shout burst out again and his sword, an arc of light in the hammering sun, cut through the upthrust rim of the brazen shield and leaped on. His shoulders were hunched by the thrust of his muscles; his whole titan's body bent to the stroke. The sword flashed clear, and for a breath of time the two bodies stood there in confrontation, and afterward the crowd saw what had happened. A head, still cased in a purple-crested helmet, was tumbling like an awkward ball upon the sand!

With a brusque thrust of his hand, Prester John tumbled the blood-spouting trunk backward and turned heavily toward the man in gold, who still weaved dizzily on his feet.

"Come and die," said Prester John.

The golden guard lifted his sword in salute. "Nay, brother," he said clearly. "Thou shalt live for all of me. Remember this, when we meet in some other life, and call me 'comrade': *Thou art the man!*"

He slammed his sword into its scabbard, swung about and, as steadily as a sentry, head high, shield at rest, he

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marched back toward the barrier, toward the trumpet and the arrow of his death.

"Two battles have been waged," Prester John muttered in his bloody beard. He stood on braced, rigid legs, his mighty shoulders bowed, not as beneath a load, but in menace and in power. He was aware now that purple shadows were crawling across the western rim of the black arena, had shaded in kindness the inverted face of Kassar. He twisted his head to smile up at the corpse of his blood brother.

"A few drops of thy blood are avenged, my brother," he said. He drew back his heavy shoulders and lifted his sword so that it glittered, red and ominous, in the diminishing sun.

"Send out your gods!" he bellowed at the mob, "or does their purple blood shrink from the caress of Prester John?"

There was a whisper like the stir of the Flame Wind and to the ears of the waiting man they seemed to form an echo of the golden guard's last words: *"Thou art the man!"*

Prester John frowned in impatience. What that whisper meant he did not know, but his battle-heated limbs were stiffening. He swung the sword, dragged his heavy feet once more toward the altar whose pure white was smeared with scarlet. His gray eyes, sunken under the frown of his brows, probed toward the Red Gate where Bourtai had said, a horse was waiting. Well, he would never reach it. The gods were coming, and the priests of scarlet and blue and gold, of green and silver and purple and black, would add their strength to the arm of their gods. Prester John flexed his sword in his hands, and it snapped clean in half. He shrugged and stooped for another weapon. He sprung it and, when he released the point, it quivered and sang in his hand. Briefly, Prester John smiled. He flung up his blood-crowned head and once more the trumpets blared. The third battle was begun!

PRESTER JOHN glanced briefly toward the door in the altar, but it was sealed tightly, nor did any man issue from the gates in the barrier. He frowned, feeling the pressure of the waiting throng, and then his eyes widened and short, harsh laughter leaped from his chest. From the bloodstains on the sand, tiny, pure-white flames were licking up! Even as he watched, the flames began to run together, and as each new tongue joined, the central core leaped higher and hotter, until its center was a blinding rod of radiance. He could hear the snap and crackle of the fire, burning straight up in the motionless air, straight up until it towered twice the height of the bronze giant who waited with a thing of feeble man-made steel in his hand and dauntless courage in his gray eyes.

In the wake of the flames, the clothing of the guards was smoldering. Black threads of smoke lifted and Prester John's nostrils widened to the odor of scorching flesh, of fusing, blood-drenched sand. Stately and beautiful, this magic fire swirled before him and then, slowly, with the deliberation of marching men, it swayed toward Prester John. He gripped the steel hard in his fist. In his heart was no longer any hope, yet what man could do against this manifestation of the gods he would do! His left hand lifted and touched the bauble that still dangled about his throat, the bit of the True Cross and, briefly, a grim smile touched his lips.

"A hundred thousand to bow before thee, Christos," he whispered. "Nay, what more could I promise? I will make no bribe to the gods. Come, Prester John, it is only once a man may die, and what better way may he go than battling against false gods?"

He saluted the flames with his sword and, holding it ready at his side, he

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The Tiger's coughing roar died to a strangled snarl, then silenced as the manacle chains throttled tighter round its throat.

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marched toward that blistering core of pure white radiance. Tongues licked out to meet him like the thrusts of many swords. His skin seemed to crinkle with the heat, and he narrowed his eyes against the assault. He could smell now the singeing of his own beard. Almost, he could reach out with his sword tip to slash at the fire, but of what use was that? The sword hilt was hot in his hand. He could feel the furious winds that the flame sucked upward and, for an instant, even the fierce courage of Prester John wavered. Then his lips opened in a blurred shout, and he dropped his sword, flung himself with clutching arms straight toward the heart of the flame!

There was an instant of maddening pain, of searing heat—and it was gone! The blinding radiance winked out and Prester John found himself, wavering on his feet, embracing the headless corpse of the purple guard! With an oath, he wrenched the carcass aloft and hurled it from him, stood glaring about the arena. So this was the way the gods fought, to dare a man to his utmost—and then vanish from under his hands? Prester John threw his tensed arms high in challenge, shouting his wrath at the skies. Then his eyes widened. On his arms was no seared flesh, no blistering trace of that magic fire. He combed his fingers through his beard, and found it full and long, uncrisped by the singeing of the flames. Even the smell of the heat was gone, and there was only the staling odor of blood and the sweat of his body.

The sound of soft, mocking laughter whirled him about so that his deep-sunk feet tripped him and, almost, he fell. There glittered in the air before him a swirling rainbow arch of colors, the seven colors of the seven wizards. As he stared, frowning his doubts, the thing swirled at him like a sword. Prester John ducked and felt a sharpness like steel graze his scalp! A severed lock of his hair floated toward the sand. Prester John laughed sharply. He tore his feet from the sand in a frantic leap for his abandoned sword and straightened with its glittering curve before him. Now here was a thing a warrior could fight. The rainbow sword swung toward him, and he flung up the guard of his own steel to meet it. There was no sound, but the rainbow swished past his throat and, as he turned heavily to face it, he confronted not one, but two of these streamers of light that had the cutting edge of death itself!

Anger darkened Prester John's gray eyes. Now here, surely, was doom when a man's fending sword multiplied his enemies! They swirled like flames, whipped through the air like the veils of a dancing girl, feinting for his throat, striking both together, chopping in swift downstrokes like a Mongol drummer's sticks. Prester John dodged and ducked and whirled and, only in extremity interposed the flat of his defensive blade. Yet in a half dozen moments there were seven of those flashing swords of light swishing about his ears.

Prester John's thoughts were a whirl of madness, but somewhere in the depths of his brain an idea began to breathe. No man could fight magic with man-made tools—yet here were magic swords ready to his hand! He need only leap and grab them. The seven blades of light were circling him, quivering almost motionless in the air, lifting for a final downstroke that would slash him in seven different bits to earth. It was now he must strike, if ever. Furiously, Prester John flung his sword from him and with a dragging leap he reached out with both mighty hands for the fragments of colored light. Pain like the gash of a keen dagger knifed across his fingers and into his palms. He clamped his grip more tightly on those two grasped magic weapons and whirled them about his head—and the air about him was empty! He opened his tight-

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gripping hands and black sand poured through his fingers to the earth.

PRESTER JOHN stood with hanging arms, and it was weariness that bowed his shoulders, the weariness of battling the unknown, of fighting an enemy that no man's hands could grasp and winning triumphs that vanished into the thinness of air and a fistful of sand. There was nothing he could strike, and yet he knew with an awful certainty that had his spirit faltered for a moment, he would have died horribly beneath the keen edges of a wand of light. He had met the beasts with a savagery that matched their own, and he had met men with guile and the quickness of brain and body, but what could he summon to defeat these spirits of the air?

He sucked in a slow breath and, slowly, too, his head lifted as proudly as of old. There were channels cut in the flesh of his bearded cheeks as if grief and the promise of despair had wielded sharp chisels on his flesh, but somewhere within him a warm spark of courage still glowed. Spirit he still had, and while that spirit burned— He grasped at an idea that eluded his warrior's brain and, somewhere—it might be as far off as the fir-clad Suntai hills, or as near as the beating of his own heart—muffled drums began to throb and he heard the tinkle of softly clashed cymbals.

Stiffly, on his drained limbs, Prester John turned about and saw that the door in the base of the altar had opened again. From it stepped—*a woman!* Prester John's breath caught in his throat at the sight of her beauty, draped in a fluttering of veils like spider webs. Her black hair hung as straight as poured ink; almost, it seemed to stain the rosy marble-whiteness of her flesh. Slowly, as Prester John stared, her feet began to pick up that far thudding of the drums and the graceful willow of her body bent and swayed in a stirring rhythm as old as flesh, as new as young desire. Prester John dragged a war-weary arm across his haggard eyes. Honors they had promised him if he triumphed. Was this, then, part of his victor's mead? He took a stumbling step forward, and it seemed to him that there was, in all that waiting mob, the tension of a caught breath. He frowned and stopped.

A faint breeze stirred across the stinking floor of the arena, but to Prester John's nostrils it brought the scent of jasmine and of musk. He shuddered and stood firm. There was devil's trickery here. But where was the menace of a slave girl dancing? The flutter of her draperies wove a spell, and it seemed that as her swaying body told its ancient story he caught a song that murmured from her red ripe lips.

"My hair," she whispered, "has the fragrance of spikenard and of myrrh, and my arms are wondrously soft. There is forgetfulness in my eyes and rest in the breath of my mouth," she sang, "and I shall pillow thy weary head and give thee dreamless sleep. Come to me, mighty warrior, come."

The butterfly touch of her draperies brushed Prester John's face, and he knew that he was very tired and that rest would be sweet. He knew that no battle was worth the empty cup it lifted to the victor's lips, and that struggle was vain.

"I will sing to thee sweet songs," she murmured, "and still the wild beating of thy heart. My hands that are odored with musk shall cool the fever of thy brow and all this fretful turmoil that is living shall be forgot . . . forgot—"

It seemed to Prester John that the drums beat more slowly, and the tinkle of the cymbals grew more faint. Rest, he thought. *Rest.* He covered his burning eyes with his hands, and the heaviness of his body dragged him to his knees. The sand was soft. He dropped his hands and the veils fluttered like dying birds before his face.

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The glimmer of the woman's body was infinitely desirable. It was queer that, through those veils, he could see another thing, a white thing like a face, that gibbered at him with soundless lips. He tried to brush it aside, and it would not go. He wanted to rest and the thing disturbed him. His fists clenched in answer—and suddenly he knew what it was. He was looking into the dead, tortured face of Kassar!

WITH A great surge, Prester John came to his feet. His arms crossed before his eyes, and he staggered back on slow, leaden limbs. The drumbeats quickened and, even through his flesh, he could see the furious dancing of the woman, dancing in triumph, in high glee. And her eyes, that had been rich and dark, were gleeful, and behind her red lips, he could see sharp small teeth. He dragged down his arms and hoarsely, like a man long dead, he spoke:

"I know thee, woman! *Thou art death!*"

A scream burst from the lips of the dancing girl, and suddenly her draperies were black and from their folds, horrid, nameless things were peering. Her face twisted and the flesh drooped from it, sagged and was gone. It was a death's face that peered forth at him there in the awful stillness of the arena. A great surge of strength roared through his body and, with long bounds, he sprang toward the awful specter. A madness was upon him. Now, now, he would conquer death! He would wrench that spectral head loose from its filthy robes. He would break it into fragments on the sands. He rushed and the woman, waiting, leered at him and reached out bony arms for his embrace. Prester John shuddered to a halt.

He pointed a rigid arm toward the hole from which this specter had sprung. "Go," he said stiffly. "Go. You will embrace me soon enough, but until that day—*begone!*"

The bony arms sagged and the figure dwindled. Where there had been bones, there was a glimmering whitness—and then nothing. For a while, the black robes stood, empty, and then they slipped down and were one with the black sand.

"Yet, stay!" Prester John cried.

From the emptiness of the air, a voice answered, whispering, "Do you bid me stay, man?"

"I have conquered," Prester John said steadily, "and there are certain questions you must answer, for I have made a vow. How may one man rule Turgohl?"

The far whisper, fading, answered back: *"Who rules the princess rules Turgohl."*

"How may a man rule her?"

The whisper was so faint it might be there was so sound at all, but in Prester John's mind rang an answer: *"Ask of the crystal ball!"*

Prester John shivered and looked about him. There was a high, triumphant shout ringing in the air, and the shadows had crossed the black sands to lift toward the eastern side of the arena. There was red gold in the air from the slanting rays of the westering sun and, across the sands, men were marching, thick-pressed ranks of priests and guards coming to fight the battle of their gods who had failed. For an instant, Prester John glared toward them, and then he laughed, the high, booming laughter that had launched him into a thousand battles.

Empty-handed, his naked body streaked with blood, Prester John turned and marched to meet the attack of a thousand men. Their faces glared toward him and their glistening swords lifted to strike him down. He marched on steadily, unswerving, and a finger of golden light stretched out to kindle the fire of his hair, and the weapons fell from the hands of the men. They sagged to their knees and prostrated themselves on the black sands; they bumped their foreheads in the dust.

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Like the far, faint whisper of death, a sigh breathed up from the prostrate men, from the waiting, blood-sated throng:

"Thou art the man."

VII.

THE RED GATE was before Prester John, and he thrust open its brazen grille and strode through the brief darkness of the archway beneath the tiers of seats. In the reddening sunlight beyond, he saw the whirling ranks of parti-colored mobs of priests and guards, thick as vultures on a corpse. Prester John's eyes shot beyond them impatiently, combed the narrow court to find the horse Bourtai had promised. For once, he was surfeit of slaughter. Yet if these shavelings pressed him too close—

"Hold, man!" a voice boomed out, and Prester John's quick eyes swung to a tall, gaunt figure garbed and masked in cloth-of-gold and surrounded by rank on rank of golden priests. "Hold, man, and answer me. What said Death to you?"

Prester John snorted and turned aside, striking out with his brawny arms. Another strident voice hailed him: "Do not answer him, man. Bring your secret to me, and I will make you rich beyond your dreams."

"No, to me!"

"No, to me!"

From every direction, men were swirling into this courtyard, and the colors massed in solid ranks. There was a man in a purple mask, and another in scarlet and another in green—the vulture wizards. Prester John threw up his powerful arms.

"Listen, all of you," he cried. "I shall tell my secret to one man and one man only. Come to me when one of you rules the city completely. Not before. Now fight it out!"

For a moment, stunned silence held the crowded concourse and, in that instant, a wide gate opened and through it Prester John glimpsed a beckoning hand and the silver sheen of a horse's hide. With a roar, Prester John flung himself forward. A few hands clawed at his shoulders, but there was fear even in their touch and none restrained him long. In a half dozen lunging strides, Prester John reached the gate and thrust through. Bourtai's wrinkled monkey face grinned up into his.

"Aye, master, I knew thou must win!"

Without a word, Prester John vaulted to the horse's back. His powerful hand twisted into Bourtai's ragged robe, and his naked heels drove into the silver stallion's sides. Hoofs beat thunderously in the covered way, rang on an anvil of cobbles, and the uproar of the arena faded behind. Prester John dumped Bourtai's squirming body across the horse's withers before him and hammered on. He put the setting sun on his right hand and galloped for the South Gate. Once, between high gold-tinted towers, he glimpsed the sun. It was low, but it had not yet touched the Suntai hills. If he hurried, there was time. A swift race across the hills and the land where the flame wind blew would be left behind. Out there on the clean, savage plains, he would gather Kassar's clans and wipe this wizard tribe from the earth. Afterward, there would be looting and riches for all—and he would rule the city!

"Where . . . where goest . . . thou, m-master?" The words were jolted out of Bourtai as he bounced, belly down, across the horse.

"To Ahriman, or to hell," Prester John said savagely. "Does it matter?"

"N-nay, master, but why flee? T-the city is yours for the t-tak-ing."

Prester John made no answer. His weighty right hand pinned Bourtai down. His left, knotted in the bridle, guided the horse. There was a joy in the glide of muscles between his thighs,

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in the sweet, clean sweep of air in his face. The rhythm of the beating hoofs flowed through him. Bourtai kept gasping questions, but there was no answer from the grim bearded lips, and after a while he was silent. Prester John was beginning to feel his weariness. The wound in his thigh throbbed, and there was stiffness in his dagger-slashed cheek. The whip of the wind was cold against his sweat-streaked, naked chest, but the South Gate loomed ahead. He bent far forward and thudded his heels against the horse's flanks. Guards atop the portal were staring toward him, and there was a hunched and cowled figure standing there beside the way, a figure draped in unrelieved black and with a black mask across his face!

ANGER surged into Prester John's chest, and he whirled the horse that way. In a moment, there would be one wizard less to summon his cohorts, to fight the men of the khan! In a moment—The horse reared sharply, striking the thin air with slashing hoofs, and a neigh of terror burst from distended nostrils. Prester John fought savagely and struck the stallion between the ears. It thudded down, but turned aside from the path in which he had been driven. The wizard had not moved, but Prester John could feel the pressure of the malignant eyes behind the slits of the mask.

Once more, Prester John wheeled the stallion to the charge, and once more the horse reared and all but threw him. Savagely, Prester John flung himself to earth and leaped toward the still figure. One stride, two, he took, then something that remained invisible struck him violently on chest and forehead and thigh as if he had plunged against a stone wall. His head rang from the blow, and he reeled backward, tried once more to hurl himself to the attack. This time he took only a single stride before the fearful impact stopped him.

"You are my prisoner, man!" intoned the figure in black, softly. "You must go where I tell you."

"To Ahriman with you!" Prester John snarled. He knotted a hand into the horse's mane and leaped upon its back, flung it toward the South Gate. A single great stride the stallion took, then its head doubled under and there was a crunching sound of bone cracking under impact. Prester John was hurled to earth—and the horse was dead!

"This way, quickly, Wan Tengri!" called Bourtai.

Prester John reeled to his feet and turned in answer to the call, then saw Bourtai gesturing from a dark runway between two mud-walled houses. Prester John's challenging gaze swept a swift circuit of the narrow way before the gate. Out of narrow streets, two other tall, masked figures strode, one in silver and one in blue.

"Hold, man!" they shouted.

With an oath, Prester John hurled himself toward the runway where Bourtai crouched and stumbled in darkness to follow the light touch of the crippled thief's hand. "They will not let you leave Turgohl, Wan Tengri," whispered the thief. "Any one of them will kill you rather than let you fall into another's hands. If one seizes you, and you will not talk, he might change you into an ape to guard his garden or send you, a dull slave, to the galley oars until you had learned obedience. The honors Ahriman promised you, master, you must win."

Prester John's words snarled in his throat. "I will win," he said violently. "Ahriman will do well to guard his own!"

On silent feet, he padded through the dark where Bourtai led him. More than once he stumbled and the thief's hand briefly steadied his arm. He was consumed with weariness. When finally Bourtai pointed to a dark doorway and afterward to a pit that led downward, Prester John flung himself into it with

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a violence that almost cost a bad fall. The smoky flare of torchlight and the fetid stench of the salt-mine tunnels was welcome in his nostrils. He braced a rigid arm against the wall and stood with his chest heaving for breath.

"Bourtai," he muttered, "I must rest. What night is this?"

"The fifth, master, of the Mating Moon."

Prester John gulped a breath of relief and afterward walked on more steadily until he came to the chamber where a dung fire sent up its smoky flames and the feverish-eyed rats of Turgohl crouched to feed. Without a word, he flung himself down upon the couch and plunged into sleep.

Now, when a man has exhausted the last reservoirs of his strength, his sleep should be deep and dreamless. It was strange, then, that gargoyles of humanity began to flit through Prester John's brain. Slumbering, he fought again through the three battles of Ahriman; he heard again the luring song of Death and his own commanding voice shout the question: *"How may one man rule Turgohl?"*

It seemed to Prester John that it was his own throat that must answer that question, and he was a man wrestling with a nightmare. There was a part of him that wanted to voice that answer, and there was another part that would not. Up from the depths of sleep, he soared. He opened his eyes to find the wrinkled, malicious face of Bourtai stooped over him!

GRIMLY, then, Prester John smiled—and closed his eyes again. "Get on with your spells, Bourtai," he said thickly. "When I wish to speak, I shall, but not before. This is only the fifth night of the Mating Moon."

"Pardon, master." Bourtai's voice was mocking in its humility. "It is the sixth, and the dark hour of the Dog. Thou hast slept long."

Heavily, Prester John swung his thick limbs to the floor, stretched his great bronzed body. The wound in his thigh had been washed and sealed with balsam. Irritably, he ripped off the gum. "Open wounds heal best, thou fool," he said roughly. "Where is the food I ordered bought?"

Bourtai's face wrinkled with delight. "Thy jewels were thought out of being, master. Didst thou not slit Tsien Hui's throat?"

For a moment, Prester John glowered at the apelike face with its beady eyes, then an answering grin stirred his solid lips. "No doubt I overlooked that one throat among so many," he agreed. "Give me of thy thieves' slop, then, for this night there is man's work to be done!"

Bourtai's eyes gleamed greedily, and he darted away to fill an earthen bowl. Prester John let his eyes quest gloomily over the cavern where smoke hung in writhing bluish wreaths. The sting of it in his eyes and nostrils was a relief from the filth stench of the hole. His eyes returned to the couch and found there his yellow silken clothing and the great white cloak of the khan. His horn bow, his sword and lariat hung from gleaming crystal knobs on the wall, and the sight of them brought life and joy flooding back to his heart.

"Thou art a good thief, Bourtai," he said as he accepted the steaming bowl the man brought back. "Else a good wizard. Didst call back my tools to my hand?"

"Nay, master," Bourtai said humbly. "'Twas thy own great magic, never doubt it. While thou wast sleeping, and in the dark, thy clothing and thy weapons returned."

Prester John grunted, his eyes suspiciously on the malicious eyes of Bourtai. "Thou hast spoken, Monkey-face," he acknowledged flatly. "It is my hope there will be no need for thee to eat thy words." He tossed off the hot food.

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The slim, fair figure of the girl was shrinking, changing, growing hideous with gleaming bones. "Stop! Answer me one question!" Prester John roared. "How may one man rule Turgohl?"

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with a gulp and felt its warmth flow through his veins. He stretched once more and tugged on the padded, golden silk; twined the lariat about his waist. The cloak across his shoulders was next, and he belted home sword and arrow quiver. When the bow hung once more about his neck, he felt a man again, and his good humor returned to flash from his gray eyes.

"We begin, Bourtai," he said. "Lead me first to a tower near where the flames dance and the crystal ball bobbles in the fountain."

"That roof, master, where once before we watched?"

Prester John shook his head and smiled in his beard. "Nay, it is not high enough. We must be where I may commune with the spirits of the high air, my godfather and my godmother, the *tengri*."

Bourtai hesitated, then shrugged his crooked shoulders. "This way, master," he acknowledged. "Thou art the man, and thou knowest." He led toward one of the many tunnels of the mine.

"I am the man," Prester John acknowledged solemnly. He walked with a perceptible swagger of his broad shoulders and, softly, he began to hum through his nose. He was feeling his strength again, and his belly was warm. Certain things he had learned in his three battles, and with their aid he soon would be master of Turgohl. There would be a settlement for Kassar, and wealth for himself; and there was that matter of the vow. Almost, he could forget that throughout the city the tall, masked men with their priests and guards were searching for him; and what his fate would be if he fell into their hands. If they ever guessed that he knew no more than they themselves might conjecture—Wan Tengri threw back his head and sent his laughter booming along the smoke-streaked tunnel. Well, until they learned that, they would fear him and he could write his own warrants. There could be no waiting for the thirteenth night and the Hour of the Swine. It was a question of time before the thousands searching everywhere stumbled upon the salt mines, and then—all up with Prester John!

"My master is happy," Bourtai whispered. "It makes my heart glad."

"There are certain small things I need to know, my valiant ape," Wan Tengri said lightly. "After that—why, after that we shall help ourselves to the treasures of Turgohl!"

"And the princess?" Bourtai's tone was sly.

"Why, as to that, thou chattering ape," said Wan Tengri lightly, "I have found princesses a somewhat cold and waspish lot. And time answers all questions, Bourtai, even the questions of Death."

PRESENTLY, they were climbing rickety ladders and a well gave way to a cellar, and a cellar to stairs that wound upward in the close circuit of a tower.

"Those tunnels of thine lead everywhere, ape," said Wan Tengri. "I wonder they do not burrow into the Flame Tower itself. Or into the treasury of Turgohl."

Bourtai, scrambling ahead up the spiraling steps, now running sideways like a crab to peer back and up into Prester John's face, shook his head violently. "Nay, they are guarded by enchantment, master; by the magic of seven wizards so that no one of them can break its spell."

"But hast tried, thou tailless ape?"

Bourtai's eyes, shuttling backward over his shoulder, held a gleam of venom. "Master, my name is Bourtai."

"Ah, it is hard to remember, looking at you. But you evade my question, I think!"

"Nay, master. There is a tunnel, truly, that leads toward the Flame Tower. But it struck an enchanted wall through which the heat of the flames

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comes at times. We dared not go farther."

Prester John grunted and peered toward the top of the tower. The stone steps, without guard or rail, wound upward to the tower's top, where a narrow door led into the wall. There would be a room there and a balcony.

"Thy tower, Bourtai?" he asked softly.

"Shall a thief have a tower where there is no loot?"

Wan Tengri said, still softly: "I know not, apeling. Nay, come to me!"

His outshot hand gripped the wrist of the thief and, with a sharp swing, he had him dangling over empty space! He stooped, nicely balanced on the edge of the steps, while the thief's wrinkled face twisted upward in surprise.

"I think this is quite high enough, Bourtai," said Wan Tengri softly. "It is quite threescore cubits to the stones below. I doubt that even thy devil's magic could save thee. Nay, do not struggle, lest you tip us both into eternity!" His left hand, groping behind him, found the hook he had seen in the wall, and he tested it with a jerk. "Now, my small, lying wizard, thou and I shall talk with the tongues of truth, I think!"

"When have I lied to thee, master?" whined the thief.

"Bourtai," Wan Tengri said, very softly, "thou art the All-High. Today, at thy orders, a knife was plunged into the belly of my brother and certain portents read therein. What was found?"

"Nay, master, I do not know."

"Today, men said of me, 'Thou art the man!' What did they mean, Bourtai?"

Eagerly, Bourtai's eyes clung to those of Prester John. "Master, concerning certain things I have lied to thee. I knew when first I saw thee that thou must wage the three battles. For it is written in the stars that only one whose locks rival the sun may ever rule this city completely!"

"Aye, that I shall," Wan Tengri growled, "and the wizards test each man in their battles so that they can single out the right one. Afterward, any wizard who rules this man can destroy his brothers in sorcery. A nice brotherly love that rules you wizards!"

"Now, master, let thy slave feel stone beneath his feet once more."

Wan Tengri shook him slightly. "Not yet, small vermin. The prophecy, and one other thing I will ask of thee and, by Ahriman, thou shalt answer or try thy magic on the stones beneath thee!"

Wan Tengri's iron fingers were beginning to feel a little tired, though the man weighed so little, and hung so motionless over space. Peering down beyond him at the hard stones below, Wan Tengri knew a brief dizziness—and found Bourtai's eyes boring into his own. He laughed shortly and shook him again. "Hast not answered, I think!"

Bourtai's lips snarled back from discolored teeth. "Hear then, dog, and know thy fate! Thou shalt rule but one day, and only one wizard shall be left to reign in thy stead!"

Flame leaped in the gray eyes of Wan Tengri. "Yet I think that one wizard will not be thyself, Bourtai," he said softly. "Now, thou shalt tell me one farther thing. It is a well-known fact that each wizard, for his future safety, deposits his soul in a certain secret spot. Who holds that soul is master over the wizard. Hast sought the souls of thy six brothers, hast thou not, Bourtai, and in vain? That is why you lark sometimes in this garb and use the thieves for spies. Aye, it is as I thought. *But, Bourtai, thou knowest where thy soul is!*"

RAGE TURNED the dangling wizard's face into an animal mask of hatred, and, even as Wan Tengri stared, it was no longer a man he gripped by the wrist, but the five-taloned claw of a mighty

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tiger! The tiger's fanged jaws snarled up at him—yet the tiger weighed no more than Bourtai! Wan Tengri leaned yet farther out over the gulf, and there was a tightness in his smiling lips.

"If thou shouldst claw me, small wizard," he said softly, "thou wouldst fall—and as a tiger, canst die as quickly as any man!"

There was a snarl of terror and rage in the beast's throat, and the animal mask faded, became the sweet, appealing face of a girl whose soft eyes pleaded, whose lips were lax with fear. "Master," she whispered, "this is the true Bourtai. See, are my eyes not gray? Lift me to thy arms, and I will be thy slave!"

"Aye, that thou wilt," Wan Tengri said softly. "Where has hidden thy soul?"

"Thou wouldst not drop me, master. I could never come to thy arms!"

"Where hast thou hidden thy soul?"

The girl vanished and, instead, there was only a coldness in Wan Tengri's palm, and he saw that his cupped hand held clear, sparkling water. He tipped his hand slightly, and let a drop spill off into space, and the water screamed, and a hand clutched Wan Tengri's wrist and once more it was the small, twisted thief, Bourtai, who dangled from his grip. Wan Tengri's arm ached now to the shoulder, and his fingers were growing numb. The two men stared into each other's eyes, and in those of Wan Tengri there was no weakening.

"Wilt thou kill me, then?" whispered Bourtai. "Without me, thou canst never reach the princess, canst never rule Turgohl."

"I will risk that, father of lies," said Wan Tengri. "Thy soul?"

Bourtai's face twisted, but no words came from his mouth. His head sagged. "Merciless one, it is in my shoe. For who, think you, Wan Tengri, would steal the shoe of a thief?"

With a strong heave of his shoulders, Wan Tengri tossed Bourtai to the steps and instantly pinned him down while he wrenched off the shoes. "They are filthy enough to contain thy soul, thou scum." He stood erect and, behind him, he twisted one shoe and then the other, and as he twisted the shoe in his left hand, Bourtai shivered and dropped to his knees. Once more, Wan Tengri twisted and Bourtai cried aloud in pain.

"It is well," Wan Tengri said. "Thou hast not lied. Thou shalt lead me through the tunnels to the enchanted wall through which sometimes comes the heat of the flames about the tower. Tonight, at the Hour of the Ox, I shall put out the magic fire, brush aside these guards and learn the secret of the crystal ball."

Bourtai's wrinkled smile held mockery. "And how, master, wilt thou brush aside these many guards? Know, then, that their number has been tripled since last you gazed on the fountain and the tower. "Nay, master, I swear to thee," cried Bourtai. "As thou holdest my soul, it is a thing I cannot do. Those guards were placed there by the power of the Seven, and no one man can brush them aside. Not even my own great magic can do it."

Wan Tengri scowled. "Something of thy magic I know, and something of my own. In the Hind, there were wizards who could raise so dense and black a fog that no man could see his neighbor. That much you can do?"

"That much, surely, master."

"When a twelfth part of the Hour of the Ox has passed," Wan Tengri said slowly, "thou shalt release thy fog, then join me at the entrance to the Flame Tower. Meantime, thy thieving vermin shall fill twelve bags with salt so that they seem to be the corpses of slaves borne to feed the flames. And, at the Hour of the Ox, they shall carry these bags of salt to the entrance of the tower—and wait for me."

"And thou, master? Think not that

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I care what happens to thy sun-crowned head, my master, but I have regard for my soul in my shoe."

Wan Tengri threw back his head and sent his laughter rocketing up through the tower. "I could love thee, Bourtai, wert thou not a wizard." He pulled Bourtai to his feet and clapped a heavy hand on the twisted shoulder. "I could love thee—now that I carry thy soul. And because I carry thy soul, Bourtai, make sure that these things I have ordered are done. Nay, after thee, small thieving wizard!"

THEY traveled down many stairs and, at the foot on the stones over which Bourtai had hung, there was a small, splattering drop, but it was not water that had splashed; it was blood. They went through the cellar and down the rickety ladder to the tunnels and turned toward the Flame Tower. Wan Tengri marked the way that led up into the warehouse of furs. Even here, far below them, their stench penetrated. A hundred cubits beyond, Bourtai thrust a smoking torch into a wall notch and nodded toward the end of the tunnel where close-fitted stones blocked the way.

"There, master, is the enchanted wall."

Wan Tengri eyed it and his lips grimly smiled. "It is well. I shall increase the number of salt bags, little wizard. Every man and woman in the caverns must bear one, and mind there is no waiting after the Hour of the Ox!"

Bourtai's face held a thin mockery. "I hear and obey, master." He limped off barefooted into the dark, and Wan Tengri slung the thief's sandals about his neck and turned back to stare at the wall of stone. He was humming softly through his nose as he set about his magic. A dozen stout men with a brass-headed battering-ram would make short work of this enchanted wall, but he was one man—and he had no ram.

Deliberately, Wan Tengri strolled back to the ladderway that led up into the fur warehouse and clambered up to spread clothing and weapons on the floor. He retained only his sword and lariat and, with those bound about his naked waist, he climbed swiftly down again into the salt tunnels. With the clean, keen steel of his scimitar, he began to hack out the packed and hardened earth that bound together the rocks in the enchanted wall.

Sometimes, as he worked, he hummed through his nose, and sometimes he laughed a little to himself. Wizards had this weakness. Because they leaned on sorcery themselves, they had no strength save in sorcery. There was no problem here that a strong man and bold could not solve, as there had been nothing in the arena that Prester John had not mastered. Prester John considered that perhaps he had learned something in those battles.

Wan Tengri had allowed himself two hours for the work of mining the wall of the flaming moat that circled the tower, and like all men where clocks were few, he had an acute sense of time. The Hour of the Swine had been past when he began his work and the Hour of the Rat had sped. Finally, his sword slid through the hard-packed earth and came back wet in his hand—and in its wake a thin stream of liquid trickled, then thrust out boldly, glittering in the red light of the torch.

Swiftly then, Wan Tengri worked. The water helped, and his sword hacked out the balance of the dirt beneath the rock. As he watched, the great, smooth-sided slab of stone squeezed toward him! Sharply, he threw his shoulder against its face. It was not yet the Hour of the Ox. It had been easier than he had thought. With one hand, he unfastened the belt that held his sword scabbard, and hooking the flat buckle on the point of the blade, thrust it into the crack. When it had slid clear into the moat be-

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yond; he pulled the belt tight—and the buckle flattened and held. Rapidly, he knotted the lariat to the belt while water sprayed warm across his thighs. Now all was ready. He reached up and caught the torch and dug its flaming end into the softening mud of the floor, braced the butt against the lower edge of the rock and slowly eased his weight away. He blew out a sharp breath, for the sensitive touch of his fingertips told him that the stone had not moved—would not move until he was ready.

He was humming again as he uncoiled the lariat, looped it about the brace and, naked sword in his fist, felt his way along the utter blackness of the tunnel. When he reached the lariat's end, he knotted it to his sword and stuck it upright in the floor, in the middle of the tunnel. The time was drawing near. Carefully, he took numbered, even paces along the tunnel, while his hand, brushing the wall, sought the knobs that led upward into the fur warehouse.

"Nine-and-twenty," he muttered as his fingers found the purchase he sought. He clambered high enough to make sure, then dropped down to the floor and numbered his paces back. At twenty-nine he paused and his outreaching hand touched the upright hilt of the sword. He stood, waiting, and dimly to his ears there came a hoarse, united shouting. By Ahriman, had he miscalculated the time? Or had Bourtai too soon loosed his black fog upon the fountain guards? No time to lose. With a jerk on the lariat, Wan Tengri jerked loose the torch prop about which the rope was looped. He clenched the sword between his teeth, then he drew the rope steadily taut, twined it about his forearms and set the arched power of his back.

He lifted a foot and groped for purchase on the wall. Slowly, steadily, he loosed the power of his mighty muscles. There was a slight yielding and then the rope snubbed short. The lariat began to bite into his forearms; his breath hissed past the steel between his teeth. Thighs and back were straining to their utmost—and the stone did not yield. Savagely, Wan Tengri sawed from side to side of the tunnel, yanked and tugged. He bent forward for a new grip while the shouting that reached his ears dimly lifted to a crescendo. There was liquid in the floor of the tunnel, running warm about his ankle, but that was not enough. The entire rock must come loose or all would be lost. He had been a fool not to use some of the thieves to help him. His accursed vanity. His body was bent like a bow. With explosive force, he hurled weight and strength into one wrenching, violent backward heave.

THE ROPE went lax in his hands, and Wan Tengri pitched backward to the floor. His hand flashed quickly to the sword between his teeth and snatched it clear an instant before his naked back splashed into the water. For the instant it took him to scramble to his feet, he thought that he had failed, then there was a sullen thud of a great weight falling and, afterward, a rising roar and pound of rushing waters. Wan Tengri whirled. He was frowning in concentration as deliberately he picked up his numbered steps. His fall had thrown his calculations out, and already the water was rising, tugging at his legs. He hurried his paces, his hand dragging along the wall. If he missed that knob, he would never have a second chance!

"Three-and-twenty, four-and-twenty. Five . . . six—" He should be near the spot now, but how to gauge the length of his stride with water racing halfway to his knees. His fingers brushed a projection in the wall. Was this it? He scrambled upward, reaching above him, and there were no more knobs. The wrong place! In the darkness, Wan Tengri laughed. So far, he

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THE RIGHT EAR OF MALCHUS

By J. ALLAN DUNN

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THE RIGHT EAR OF MALCHUS

—tells a tale of an ancient relic—in a day when the Law does not recognize miracles.

By J. Allan Dunn

THE learned judge, with lifted eyebrows, looked from the strange prisoner to the eminent counsel who appeared in her behalf.

A suave and polished legalist of secure position and reputation, an aristocrat and leader of the bar.

An old, old woman in a voluminosity of clothing, swaddled in petticoats and shawls of red and green; a kerchief covering her hair, tied under her sunken jaws, like a gravecloth. Her face brown as a roasted coffee-berry, more wrinkled than a shuckled walnut. Gold coins made up her necklace and the bangles of her withered stalks of arms —visible means of support, if anything short of the grave—if even that—might persuade her to part with them.

Her cheekbones looked like closed fists, her teeth were almost gone, and her colorless, snakelike lips were tucked in.

Old, infinitely old; and infinitely wise. She sat motionless, poised, patient, all the life in her—that had defied Death for so many decades—concentrated in her eyes. At times they filmed, like those of an owl—at will, they glowed like black opals. There was an air of regality about her, a composure that ignored her position before the court as a transgressor.

Her attitude irked his honor, vaguely stirred within him a reluctant acknowledgment of her as a person. He did not doubt her wisdom nor the sincerity of her self-belief, though he might not countenance them.

He was—in his fashion—a fair man, but strict against such lawless folk, defying the very essence of what he represented.

Gypsy, charlatan, adventuress. Consort of fortune tellers and pickpockets, against whom edicts had been issued through the centuries by civilized communities. Outcasts, nomads, of no certain origin—doomed to eventual elision. Pharaon—Egyptians—Tsigane—Zingari —Rom—Tinkers.

Vagabonds.

The gaze of the learned judge passed on, briefly, to other persons—distinguished persons. These had come to testify in her favor. After all, she was in no great jeopardy, merely charged with accepting fees while practicing medicine without a license. There had been no denial of her practice within the district —nor of her cures. Here, and elsewhere, she was a famous being—a wise woman—famous, or infamous, as his judgment might hold. She was a specialist. She made the deaf to hear.

The distinguished people were known to the learned judge. A renowned aurist, from the metropolis. An equally renowned musician, a composer, conductor of symphonies; a man who refused any dictatorship over his art. He would lightly refuse the invitations of the mighty, but he had come—with the aurist and the lawyer—to do homage to the Queen of the Gypsies.

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"COUNSELOR, you know the charge. Are you ready for trial?"

"If your honor please, may I plead that the defendant has used no medications, advised no prescriptions. Her healing is accomplished by the laying on of hands, and through the powers she believes invested in her—"

The magistrate held up an object that had been taken from the romni by a jail matron. It was a small box, seemingly of metal, covered closely with the skin of a lizard, blackened and worn by time. The prisoner had protested against its removal. Now there came a glint of inner flames within those black-opal eyes—but she was still—and silent.

"A *power*, vested no doubt in this . . . this amulet. This savors of fetishism, or sorcery and incantations. Such matters foster ignorance and superstition."

"Not more so, perhaps, if your honor please, than the relics of saints and martyrs."

"Does she make any such claim for this? You say you have secured an interpreter. We will question her presently. Information has been laid that she has taken money—"

"Information, if your honor please, laid without the knowledge or consent of a client of mine, from gossip by a servant, knowing her mistress visited the defendant. For the restoration of her hearing, my client made the defendant a gift, in gratitude for a cure accomplished after specialists had failed in their treatments.

"That client of mine, well known to your honor, has retained me as counsel for the defendant. She is willing to appear as a witness, if called upon."

His honor pursed his lips. The unnamed client was a lady of importance, of potent connections, financially, socially and politically. She would not relish appearing in court, her testimony would be all in favor of the prisoner. There would be publicity that might not favor him.

"This is all beside the issue. The law has been broken, may be broken again—unless such actions are severely dealt with—under the law. You wish to offer testimony, sir?"

He addressed the aurist. His tone was peevish. He felt his authority being thwarted, as vested in himself, rather than the law. "I must ask you to be brief—and to the point."

"—as an aurist, an otologist, I discovered serious disease. Aural polypi, paralysis of the facial nerve, and a septic thrombosis of the venal sinuses. A tumor of the auditory nerve threatened, with symptoms of meningitis. An operation was indicated, but I did not care to consider it under the existing conditions of age and debility—"

"And you think that the *power* of this gypsy cured her?"

"*Something* cured her. *I* did not. Were I not a scientist, I should be inclined to consider this a miracle."

"You believe in miracles?"

The aurist flushed, seeing no occasion for the lightly veiled sneer in the tones of the magistrate.

"I may have seen one. In this case I called in consultants. We were agreed in diagnosis. We marvel at the complete cure which has resulted in general physical improvement. I might add," he said dryly, "there are more things in heaven and earth—"

"You are excused. We will use the interpreter."

THE MUSICIAN was sworn—his dark face alight, his eager eyes fixed with sympathy upon the romni, speaking a few words to her.

"You know their language?"

"Romani is their native tongue. I know only a few words of that, but what they call their 'secret language,' is

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Rumanian. I am a Rumanian. She tells me she will speak freely if her talisman is returned to her. She says it is a holy thing—and yet one that may be evil. That it contains that which was caused in evil and empowered by holiness."

"It sounds like skulduggery to me. Ask her what the box contains—then we may consider its return."

"—there was a very holy man, who had acquired the hatred of the priests of that land, so that they wished to take him, to have him condemned to death. The priests sent a party out to seize him. One of his followers cut off the ear of one of the retinue of the priests, and the holy man chided him, caused another ear to grow by his touch.

"The ancestor of this woman, whose name is Sarai, was a small boy of the tribe the Egyptians call Harami. He was curious to see what was happening. He followed the crowd. When the healing took place, he was thrust roughly forward, and dropped upon his hands and knees. One of his hands fell upon the severed ear, which was the right ear of a servant of the high priest. He took it to his father.

"The name of the servant was Malchus, and the name of the man who smote off the ear was Simon Peter. The name of the holy man was Jesus."

There was a swift and intense silence in the courtroom. The musician touched the Bible on which he had sworn.

"The matter, she tells me, is set down in this volume, which she calls your 'sacred book,' on which oaths are made."

The learned judge flushed and frowned. "This is sheer blasphemy. I impose a fine of fifty dollars or, in default, thirty days in jail. Case closed."

The lawyer rose. "The fine shall be paid."

"Your honor," the musician and interpreter said, "she prays that the ear of Malchus be returned to her. She warns that if it is not used rightfully, reverently, the power within it will work harmfully—"

"The power—again the *power!* If she speaks the truth, which is beyond believing, this ear was smitten from one who was an antichrist."

"It was still living, still a part of the man, though severed. As a living part, the power that entered into the servant could also enter into this—"

"Balderdash! One would think there is Romani blood in *you.*"

The musician flushed. "If that is so, I am proud of it—"

He turned to the romni and spoke swiftly with her. Her answer came hoarsely, like the croaking of a frog, and her eyes were like jewels.

"It will not matter so much to her, your honor, since she is very old—and her works are nearly done. But she warns you—"

"Nonsense! This is confiscated as an agent, a factor in lawbreaking. There will be nothing in it but some trumpery. The clerk will call the next case."

At the door, the Queen of the Gypsies—freed—paused, placed her shrunken hands to her temples, doubled up, forefingers and little fingers extended, forming twin sets of horns—pointing at the eminent jurist.

IN HIS private chambers, after the day's routine was ended, the learned judge sat, with an open book before him. In the outer room his clerk awaited his pleasure, fending off applicants who wished audience off the record.

The book was not a lawbook, it was not a volume he often consulted. Even now he studied it with more interest than reverence.

It was the tome the Queen of the Gypsies had called the "sacred book," on which thousands of witnesses had sworn—many of them falsely.

He turned—as one accustomed to re-

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HERMIT OF MARS

ON Mars, among other formidables, were the Hounds and the Eaters, the difference between the two being that the Hounds would just as soon eat a man, and the Eaters would definitely prefer it. These were just two of the difficulties that beset a party in search of one of Mars' pioneers. The struggle of these Earth-bound people for existence on Mars makes fascinating reading, as written by **Clifford D. Simak** in June

ASTOUNDING

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search—to the gospels, seeking cross reference:

And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest, and smote off his ear.

And one of them smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear.
And Jesus—touched his ear, and healed him.

Then Simon Peter having a sword, drew it, and smote the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus.

"The evidence," mused the judge, "is incomplete, even conflicting. Mark does not mention the incident at all, yet he must have been present, if the gospels are to be accredited. Matthew and John say nothing about the healing. If I remember rightly, John was the favorite disciple. Would *he* have overlooked a miracle?"

The judge took his penknife, opened the small blade, peeled the lizardskin from the metal box with some difficulty. It was made of copper, graved with what seemed like arabesque decoration, or inscription. The metal was varnished with some sort of lacquer, closed hermetically.

For a moment he decided not to try to open it. He remembered the final gesture of the romni, for which he had almost recalled her for contempt of court—feeling that against his dignity.

The lacquer was old. Deprived of the lizardskin, it was affected by the chemistry of the air within the room, and crystallized, flaking away.

The lid lifted from a bevel.

There was something inside like a dried mushroom—it had the fleeting semblance of an ear before it turned to a pinch of dust as the air reached it.

From it came a faint aroma of ancient incense.

The learned judge sat staring at it as the clerk came in.

"Beg pardon, judge. I thought your phone must be out of order. Or didn't you wish to answer it?"

The judge looked at him testily. The telephone rang shrilly. He made no motion toward it. There was a vague terror growing in his eyes.

"Are you feeling sick, sir—you don't look well."

"Speak up! What were you saying? *What were you saying, man? Speak up!*"

He could not hear his own voice! He read the clerk's look of wonder and worry.

"I said"—his voice faltered—"My God, I can't hear! I'm *deaf*, I tell you —*deaf!*"

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DON'T GO HAUNTING

By ROBERT COLEY

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DON'T GO HAUNTING

It did produce a lot of satisfaction, of course, to crack back at a few annoyances, but—

By Robert Coley

THE apartment was three steps below sidewalk level, low-ceilinged and, therefore, quite dark even on the sunniest days, like this one in the advanced spring. Ornstein kept two lights burning in the rear room all day long. It was a floor-through apartment; if the mailman wished, he could stick his nose into the grille protecting the front window and see all the way back into the garden if the French doors were open. It was a walled garden and once a jewel, with a marble fountain that played. The Carrara girl was gone now, and the curbing of the pool had been filled with soil to make a circular flower bed. Vines grew thick on the brick walls, and only the least stir of the heavy traffic on Fourteenth Street penetrated to the yard. There was a table with magazines and cigarettes, and ash tray, a glass of beer and a bottle; there was a comfortable weathered oak chair with a cushion, and there Adolf Ornstein sat—not exactly alive, and not exactly dead.

Properly, it was the flesh, the mortal envelope of Ornstein and nothing more—the thing slumbering in the chair. Because he, his conscious intelligence, his mental self, or whatever lubricant it was that oiled the mechanism known as Adolf Ornstein, was standing with arms akimbo looking down at his clothed clay speculatively, without surprise. It had just happened. The secret was known to learned men in ancient times, of course, but in this modern day there were few adepts, save for certain high lamas in Tibet, who in their inaccessible places study the occult gospels removed for safety before the burning of the library of Alexandria. Ornstein was a graduate student in both black and white magic, his particular bent being for the darkish variety, through acquaintanceship with the Polish Count S. Metonna Lonczewski.

Having broken the lock of his grandfather's trunk as a lad, in the attic of the family home in the Ukraine, the count had found an archaic work on magic, written on parchment in classical Latin. The count, being a prodigy, had digested a third of the book when his aunt came up to see what he was doing. He promptly hypnotized her and dispatched her to the kitchen to make him a plate of sandwiches to eat while reading. The book was a translation from an earlier work in Egyptian, which had been done in turn from the lost original in the language of the Atlantides, and was still in the count's possession.

Following Lonczewski's detailed instructions, at his own risk, Ornstein had performed the experiment successfully. The problem had not been especially difficult; it was a matter of will-power, concentrating in specific directions given in that particular chapter in the book, eliminating the directions one by one until what remained was an avenue of escape, exciting liberation from the slavish monotony of having a physical body.

The sun was shining down on his clay,

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but the free Ornstein didn't cast any shadow. He thought he had better report on his condition, so he went to the phone in the rear room of his apartment and gave Lonczewski a buzz.

"HELLO, count?" he asked. "This is Dolf Ornstein."

"Hello, Dolf," said the count. The count had no teeth; resulting from his meticulous enunciation, his words sounded as though he were pushing them very rapidly through a keyhole. "Hello. How are you?"

"I am very well," Dolf said. "How are you?"

"I am in good health, too. What is on your mind?"

"I thought I would tell you that I made the experiment, and it is a complete success."

"Do you mean the one in Chapter XVII?" asked the count. "You do. Remember, I told you it was dangerous. You don't want to do anything that you might regret."

"I won't. You won't give me away, now, will you?"

"Give you away? I should stick out the neck of Lonczewski." The count laughed with a sound like the puttering of a small gasoline motor. "Are you in that condition now? Are you invisible?"

"I am completely invisible," Dolf reported, looking down at himself. "But the funny thing is, I have just as much weight as I always had. There's a hollow in the seat of the chair where I'm sitting."

"That is correct," Lonczewski informed him. "It didn't occur to me to tell you. How do you feel?"

"Well—call it exhilarated," Dolf decided. "It's a kind of tingling, or singing, like a mild current of electricity."

"That's the way I remember it," said Lonczewski. "I haven't done it for a long time—not since I had to go to that man's house for the book he borrowed from me. It was the only way to get it back. Where is your body?"

"In the chair out in the garden, count. From here it looks dead drunk. There's a glass of beer that I didn't quite finish."

"You were drinking beer?" the count demanded. "My friend, it's remarkable that you had any luck at all. There is not supposed to be any alcohol, or nicotine, or drug in the system, not even any food in the stomach. You had extraordinarily good fortune. Don't press it."

"I don't intend to. Now, about returning to the status quo. I feel a little nervous about that, I must say. Suppose I couldn't get back?"

"I felt the same way," Lonczewski chortled. "But it is simple as flipping a coin, unless you have a hard time getting to sleep. Remember, what you left out in the garden is an imbecile; it is a man, but it is mindless. It cannot take care of itself; it is scarcely breathing, and the pulse is so faint that you will have a hard time detecting it. That thing is senseless, and something might happen to it if you go away. I am taking no responsibility, you know; how long you want to leave your clay in jeopardy is up to you. When you want to reanimate the clay, all you have to do is to go to sleep near it and it will happen automatically. Reanimating the clay of course, is only a special kind of sleep."

"Well, I'll have to wait a few hours," said Dolf. "It isn't two o'clock yet, and I never had any luck going to sleep during the day."

"It is up to you. But if I were in your shoes, I would carry the clay in and make it comfortable on the bed. For one thing, it will get pretty dusty out there in the garden."

"Yes; but as you said, there isn't much of a heartbeat discernible. The weather is bright and fair, and the sun will keep the clay warm. If its temperature dropped too low, the heart might stop beating altogether. I wouldn't like

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that to happen. The thermometer in the back room here says that it is only 72°."

"That's something to consider," Lonczewski agreed. "But the clay might get sunburned."

"I think it has sufficient protective tan. During the winter I used the sun lamp regularly."

"I take it that you are going somewhere this afternoon."

"I certainly am going somewhere."

"I have two engagements, but I can break them for you," the count said. "Do you want me to come down to your place and take care of your clay until you are through with what you have in mind?"

"Oh, no, thanks!" Dolf refused. "I wouldn't even consider such an imposition. Everything will be all right."

"Ho-kay, then," said Count S. Metonna Lonczewski, who liked to use American slang. "If you commit any crimes, be absolutely sure that they can't be traced back to you, aside from the fact that you cannot afford to indulge in the least microscopic minim of conscience. Don't get caught!"

"I will consider and strain to the utmost, no matter what the temptation is," Dolf promised.

"No matter if you are invisible," Lonczewski said, "you still leave fingerprints. No one has to see you. Men have been hanged for crimes they did not commit. The quicksand, my boy, is circumstantial evidence."

"That," said Dolf, "I will avoid."

AFTER hanging up, he paused on his way out to the garden to look at himself in the mirror over his linen chest. The mirror was empty so far as any reflection of himself was concerned. At his eye-level, through him, was reflected a watercolor landscape that hung over the fireplace behind him.

It was the damnedest thing, and it gave him a very odd feeling, this being bodiless. Totally incorporeal.

He continued into the garden, and was just in time to find his clay slumping, at the point of falling off the chair. He rescued it, pushing the shoulders back; the skull might have been cracked on the flagstones if the loose body had tumbled.

The clay presented the blanched appearance, along with the un-co-operative handling, of a corpse too new yet for the inevitable rigor mortis. Ornstein was somewhat scared. He felt the pulse and it was there, faraway and slow.

He arranged the clay so that it wouldn't fall out of the chair, propping it securely with the head comfortable, the legs extended, the arms draped in the lap. He tested it, pushing at it all around to make sure that it would stay planted just so. With thumb and forefinger he spread the lids of one eye, and the blue orb was as clammily blank and gruesome as a pickled nightmare. He jumped a step backward with a whispered oath.

Through the open gate in the rear wall trotted the supeintendent's white terrier from the basement apartment on Fifteenth Street. The dog padded to one side, then the other, as though its moist and intelligent nose had sniffed a barrier. Then it stood planted on its four legs, pointing rigidly not at the recumbent flesh in the chair, but directly ahead at the spot where Ornstein wasn't casting a shadow. He looked at the dog, highly interested.

Her lips skinned back as her muzzle lowered, and the hair on her back bristled erect from her ears to her tail. With low, continuous growls she shifted her legs as though getting ready to spring, but she was inching steadily backward. In a flash she whipped around and bolted, yelping, through the gate and beyond into the cool safety of the super's apartment.

The super, overalled Archibald Agnew, stalked through the gate shortly to see what had scared the hell out of his dog. He looked at the open-mouthed,

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obviously unconscious body of Ornstein draped in the garden chair for a moment.

"Drunk," he muttered contemptuously, and went away.

Since his clothes garbed his clay, Ornstein was, of course, naked. Nor was it in the least unpleasant in the stagnant air outside. No one could see him and he couldn't see himself as he was now, but with twenty-odd conditioned years of behavior behind him he could be fairly certain of how he was displacing what amount of air. Habit. Visibility wasn't necessary in his knowing what his posture was, where his arms and legs were. Merely because he was invisible didn't mean that he would bark his shins on low furniture, because he could walk around or step over as he would in the flesh, without having to gauge distances. He still weighed a hundred and sixty-eight pounds in spite of the fact that he was invisible. That was the only difference; in shape and substance he was the same. If he spread his hand and whacked himself on the chest, there was a meaty sound. With invisible fingers he could comb invisible hair and scrub invisible teeth.

He danced an impromptu jig, and his bare heels thumped on the flagstones. He picked a yellow violet, just to prove that it could be done, and laid the flower on the table. On second thought, he threaded the stem through the buttonhole of his clay's jacket. Anyone watching would have seen the violet pick itself, adjourn to the table momentarily, then continue like a winged insect to his clay's lapel. Ornstein laughed heartily, because there were great possibilities ahead.

A SWARTHY man in shirt sleeves stuck head and shoulders out of a window on the third floor and looked down for a couple of minutes at the charming little garden. Then he threw down a cigar butt, whose coal burst in a shower of sparks, and ducked back into the apartment. Ornstein waited, and the man up there cautiously poked his head out again because the man in the chair was apparently sound asleep.

There was a moderate litter of matches, bottle caps, hairpins, milk-bottle stoppers, a garter, dead tendrils from a Wandering-Jew, glints from a broken milk bottle, scraps from a piece of pastry that didn't taste right and had been pitched out the window, and a few soggy stogy butts—the usual and continuous smattering of rubbish and garbage from the upper floors of the building. It was a puzzling thing, but the people living in the sardine-can apartments over him were jealous of him because he had a garden with flowers growing in it. At first he had let them come down to enjoy the privileges he was paying for. They sun-bathed and picked his preciously tended flowers, and helped themselves to drinks in his kitchen, just as though he were a guest.

Then he folded up the deck chairs and put them away so that they wouldn't have any place to sit. Then they dropped articles of laundry, slips, dish towels and what not, as an excuse for coming down. He kept the French doors to his apartment locked for a while. Then he said, "This is a private garden. Keep out." They started hating him, and made it an active hatred by throwing stuff out of the windows. Every Saturday he had to give Agnew a dollar for sweeping up with his broom.

The man with the broad face and negroid nose up there on the third floor was Dino Ferronatti. He was no good. He was nasty, was broad-shouldered, didn't like work, and made a practice of going out of his way for trouble; he liked to hit people. He had found out that if you knocked a man cold you could walk away with his wallet. It was a great and enjoyable novelty here in America, because in the old country you could brain a man with a rock and con-

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sider yourself lucky if you found a few chews of tobacco in the corpse's pockets. Ferronatti held a brown paper bag filled with garbage. He gave the bag a heave, and it plopped and burst on the flagstones, scattering orange rinds, coffee grounds, eggshells, and green stuff that looked like liquid spinach.

"Why, you stinking cheese," Dolf said distinctly. "How would you like to come down and eat this mess?"

Ferronatti, having ducked out of sight again, reappeared; with jaw mugged out a la Doo-chay, he demanded incredulously: "What you call me, punk?"

"Come on down here and I'll spit in your eye," Dolf said. He wasn't as big as Ferronatti and under ordinary circumstances never would have tackled him. On the other hand he was no weakling, and he took up a stand near the super's hall entrance with his heart beating with anticipatory pleasure. He didn't have long to wait. The door was yanked open, and out charged Ferronatti into the garden. He was breathing hard from running down the stairs.

"O. K., you!" he called belligerently to the form in the chair. Only a yard away from him, the invisible Ornstein fetched him a whistling right-hander squarely in the middle of his mush.

Ferronatti stood up straight, eyes popping with disbelief, and took a few little steps in a circle while he got his balance. Then with a growl he doubled his fists and crouched, looking around to see what had hit him, like an animal lost in the dark. His angry gaze fixed on the unconscious clay in the chair, suspiciously.

Dolf got set, wound up and fired his best Sunday punch into Ferronatti's teeth. Something snapped. Dolf thought he had broken his invisible knuckles and massaged them tenderly with his invisible left hand. Then he saw the tooth on the flagstones. Ferronatti had assumed a horizontal position in front of the doorway and lay supine with his eyes closed for a little more than the count of ten. Dolf watched; the eyes opened dazedly and the man struggled to a sitting position; he scrambled to his feet then, and fled back into the building holding his jaws. Dolf called after him: "Get the idea? No more throwing stuff out the windows."

"O. K.; don't get hard about it," Ferronatti snarled.

Dolf felt smug. It was the first time he had ever knocked a man cold, and the accomplishment, thanks to Count Lonczewski's able teachings, was gratifying.

He paid a last visit to his clay to make sure that everything was all right, loosened the necktie and opened the top collar button for greater comfort in breathing. He also loosened the shoelaces, knowing that on every occasion when he slept with his shoes on he would awake with his feet aching as though they had been beaten.

Returning to the apartment, he took another look into the mirror. There was no reflection, but he felt of himself and he was there, all right. He pulled a drawer open and took out a handkerchief, unfolded it and blew his nose with it. The homely sound was convincing, and he got a childish pleasure out of watching the handkerchief cavort all by itself in the air. In short, he was unquestionably in a position to haunt houses.

"By golly," he said with quiet jubilation, "I've always wanted to haunt a few houses I know of, and here goes."

LEAVING the apartment, which faced south on Fourteenth Street, he mounted the stairs to the parlor floor to perch a while in thought. First he sat down on the edge of the top landing, then got up to roost on the iron side railing.

There were certain disadvantages to being invisible. Neither standing nor

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sitting was very comfortable on the general run of surfaces, and forays like this one depended on weather conditions. Going around invisible in the wintertime would be out of the question. He wondered about his feet getting dirty. That would be a fine thing—a pair of bare footprints flickering along the sidewalk like shadows. He cocked a leg up to look at the sole of his foot; he couldn't see anything, and he had already walked around enough to get grimy. A fortunate development negatively.

His hunkers began to hurt on the thin railing and he stood up, watching traffic on the street and particularly pedestrians. No one looked up, though a fair percentage of persons rubbernecked through his front window. That was because the garden in back was a bright green in the sunlight, and such a tended garden as Ornstein's was more than somewhat rare on Fourteenth. He was comfortably warm; since his invisibility passed a hundred percent of the bright sunlight there was small likelihood that sunburn would reveal him.

His only worry then was that something might go wrong, that the term of invisibility might have a capricious limit and spontaneously he would appear naked in a public place. Lonczewski, however, had assure him that such an embarrassment could not occur. Control was absolutely his, Ornstein's, until he wished to terminate his condition by the mere expedient of going to sleep, when his conscious mind would again become automatically united with his subconscious. He was also assured that the clothed clay which he was leaving in the garden would not do any somnambulating and get itself into trouble. It would stay strictly put until he had further use for it.

With full confidence, now that he had gotten used to the true nature of his condition and was convinced of its advantages and foresaw the privileges and responsibilities thereunto appertaining, he descended to the sidewalk. He had to be careful. He could get run down by a taxi just like anyone else, in which event he wondered what would happen to his clay. Would it die? More probably it would continue living as a helpless idiot and would be put into an institution.

On the bottom step he paused to let a building-line hugger pass, the type of pedestrian who couldn't go anywhere without maintaining the maximum distance between himself and the gutter. During the brief delay Dolf rubbed the bristles on his jaw with his fingertips, and produced the familiar sound of soft chalk marking a blackboard. He clapped himself on the shoulder, and he was still there, just as solid as the horse drawing that rubber-tired milk wagon now passing in the direction of the Ninth Avenue El. For good measure he mussed his hair up properly. He could go about unshaven and with his hair unkempt, and it was no one's damned business but his own.

He walked down to the corner of Eighth Avenue and Fourteenth Street, feeling just a trifle deflated so early in the adventure. In a garage only five minutes' walk removed, he kept a little sedan in live storage, but he couldn't use it. A driverless car in motion through the streets of Manhattan would attract no end of attention, besides the fact that the license number would be noted more than once.

He couldn't use taxis. Either he walked, stole rides on the subways, or hopped rides on the rear bumpers of surface vehicles, like the kids. He didn't mind walking as a rule, but he hadn't gone barefoot since he was in breeches, and his feet weren't calloused any more. He had to weave in and out of pedestrian traffic unless he wanted to get bumped, and he had to watch where he set his feet down, to avoid cuts and bruises. But the novelty and exhilaration were such that he kept wearing his

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mischievous grin—diabolical grin.

He had a destination in mind, one chief destination among several, and a crime to commit—the major crime of murder. The thought of committing murder made his heart beat fast; with the cruelty that the most sunny-featured men keep bottled up with a disarming whistle, he realized that he would have committed murder long ago except for

Ornstien stopped. Someone, evidently, had beaten him to it. It was clear he could not murder this pair.

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the consequences. He knew there is latent, cheerful murder in every human being's heart, and that he was no exception. That crimes go unpunished, that an individual is entitled to vengeance out of all proportion to original fault.

THE ADDRESS in which he was interested was on Waverly Place; the most convenient means of reaching it was by taking the Eighth Avenue Subway, which zigged east from here, and getting off at the Washington Square stop. Not a long walk from there.

The cast of characters were few. There were two men, and the guilty one was either Wilbur Huron, the slender Englishman who looked like a spy, or the lusty red-headed Hoagie McCaffery. The girl was Kathleen Feles and she lived on Waverly Place. Until a year ago she had been his wife, Ornstein's.

Then she had said: "Rolfie, I am leaving."

"Why?" he had asked, being just as noncommittal about it as she was.

"Because I want to. When we were married, didn't we agree that either one of us could do whatever he wanted?"

"I guess so. But I sort of expected that I would have something to say about it. Can I ask any questions, like who the man is?"

"If you wanted to break off, would you answer any questions about who the woman is?"

"There isn't any woman, angel pie."

"I didn't say there was any man, darling. I just think that it would be better if I went away for a while to think things over. You don't think I'm going to walk right out and go and live in sin with somebody, do you?"

"Well, what the hell are you leaving for? I love you."

"Oh, no, you don't," Kay had said. "You just said down at the Municipal Building when we were walking around, 'Let's try it and see if it works,' and we went up and got married. You made a lot of promises, but all you've done for nearly a year is sit around and plant bulbs in the garden and pull weeds."

"Damn it! It isn't everybody in New York who can afford to spend most of his time weeding his garden," Dolf protested. "What have I done?"

"That's the trouble; you haven't done anything," Kay had said. "You were going to angel a play and have your name in lights; you were going to buy up a bankrupt store and make it pay; you were going to write a book; you were going to finance a man who had some machinery for getting gold out of the Atlantic Ocean. You haven't done a thing."

"Somebody's taking gold out of the ocean already," Dolf had said.

"So what? It's a big ocean, isn't it? And there's another ocean out West. All you do is sit around and live on the interest from the money you inherited from your crackpot uncle out in California, and plant seeds that never do anything, and pull little blades of grass out of the ground. Never mind; I'm going. You never loved me in the first place."

"Maybe I didn't," said Dolf coldly, because obviously she wasn't in love with him. She had married him for his money. The allowance he laid beside her breakfast plate every Saturday morning was as much as he got for section-managing in a department store before his uncle died, but she wasn't satisfied with it. Shoes and dresses and coats and crazy hats—she was always buying things. Five thousand dollars interest a year wasn't enough; she wanted to cut into the principal and take cruises to Bermuda, and buy diamonds and an imported car; she wanted a house in the country, and when they didn't go to Florida for the winter she almost stopped speaking to him; she was extravagant.

When the door closed on her and she

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was gone, she was gone for good. Both McCaffery and Huron were wealthier than Dolf was, and she could take her pick because she was a remarkably personable girl.

At the cost of a thousand dollars he had found out where she lived, and he had to pay the private detective for his meals and hack fares and room rent besides. He was quite piqued. Every time he thought about it, it was as though a bee stung him, and yet he couldn't do anything about it. She never telephoned him, and if he dropped in on her unexpectedly and both Huron and McCaffery were there, they would beat the living daylights out of him while Kay urged them on. When she said, "I am leaving," she meant, "I am never going to see you again in my whole life."

The idea of murder occurred to him even then, for he had added her up previously and slapped his forehead many times at the inevitable conclusion —she was a luxury. But he had not progressed in his studies with Count S. Metonna Lonczewski to the necessary extent until recently.

So he was going to commit a murder, possibly two murders, three at the outside depending on circumstances. He descended the steps to the subway, walking clear of gum and expectorations. He ducked under one of the turnstiles, and from the lower platform boarded a southbound local.

HE TOOK a frontwise seat, the most popular type. After him, a man and a girl spotted his apparently empty seat simultaneously. The man butted the girl aside with his shoulder and came on the run. When he presented his buttocks preparatory to sitting down in Dolf's lap, Dolf planted both feet on the chubby, inviting posterior and catapulted the stranger down the aisle at a mad run. Even the hugest strides couldn't keep up with the hurtling body, however, and the fellow bellyflopped magnificently. People laughed, and the man skulked into the car ahead. Dolf lost the seat anyhow, because the girl promptly claimed it. No lengthwise seat ever manufactured is as good as a crosswise one. He was tempted to sit right where he was and let her take the consequences, but you could never tell what a woman would do when she started screaming. If he was taken hold of, he could be held onto. So he got up disgustedly and rode standing, hanging onto one of the enameled uprights.

Out on the sidewalk again he breathed more easily. Coming down Eighth Street was a girl holding two dogs on taut leashes. She walked with the insolent superiority of a spoiled princess. Her complexion was as flawless as milky ivory, and her eyebrows were black and enhanced her features with the winged arch of their curves. She wore her hair up in short black curls, and looked more like a certain Hollywood actress than the original. Her mouth was shapely, not quite pouting and not quite world-weary or knowledgeful in expression, and lipsticked in satiny red with jewel precision. Her stockings were as sheer as the merest trace of cigarette smoke. She wore a wool suit in somewhat grayed violet with a little felt trifle of hat to match, the hue of the stockings matching; her blouse was striped lavender silk, and there was a little necktie effect that only a woman could get by with and looked silly anyhow. She was gotten up with the exactness of clockwork, and Dolf Ornstein was filled with an instantaneous and violent abhorrence. The fragrant little witch was walking her dogs down Eighth Street from Fifth Avenue, slumming.

The dogs were spectacular Russian wolfhounds, and were extending their lean, laughing muzzles to get within smelling range of a yapping Pekingese up the way on Greenwich.

In the first place Dolf didn't like dogs

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in New York. It was hard on the dogs, and it was impossible to keep them a hundred percent curbed. Moreover, people like this million-dollar filly who kept dogs in the city felt, invariably, pretty damned good about themselves for no logical reason. The word was snooty, with a variable spelling. Besides which, Dolf might have been influenced by the fact that here was something he could never have, something he couldn't buy because he didn't have money enough and she was already purchased and paid for and not on the market any more, very likely—the most conceited morsel he had ever seen on the hoof.

So he walked around behind her and got into step, observed the way she was looking down her nose so that the enchanting shine of her eyelids might be publicly included among the items of her glamour. Dolf measured distance, cocking his arm in the manner of a man about to slap a mosquito. He took a terrific swipe downward at the hand gripping the leashes, and the impact of his masculine fingers produced a sound like a firecracker touched off.

"Yow!" the girl ejaculated. Her little ivory fist jumped open, the leashes escaped like whips, and the two wolfhounds bolted for the mean-faced fawn Pekingese as though shot from a gun. The girl went tearing after the dogs. She could run, too, though she probably hadn't indulged in such an undignified pastime since she was wearing cotton bloomers, and she looked just as silly as all women look when so engaged. Dolf followed along to the uproar. The China dog's owner was holding the yipping animal up in the air at arm's length and yelling; a cop bulled his way forward and demanded: "Can't you hold your dogs?"

"A man hit me and I let go," said the girl in violet, panting. She pointed at random to a young fellow in the gathering crowd. "That man there."

"You're a liar," said Dolf.

The cop swung around, and he was a poisonous, bucktoothed, red-faced customer. He barked: "Who said that?"

"I did," Dolf said. "Want to make something of it?"

"Wha-a-at?" Officer Delehanty demanded, outraged.

Delehanty's eyes bulged, and he probed face after face among the bystanders, hunching his shoulders. Dolf walked around and got into a store entrance, where he wet his lips, stuck his tongue out and blew a loud, insulting and satisfying razzberry. He added: "If you don't like it, you great big beautiful policeman you, you know what you can do about it."

Everybody was too scared to move a muscle. Delehanty was a smart cop and used his head; he plowed back and forth through the crowd, shouldering and pushing people and ordering, "Come on, come on! Break it up! Come on, walk!"

The crowd and dogs dispersed rapidly. After a period of looking wild-eyed up and down Greenwich, the cop headed toward some mysterious destination that cops have.

DOLF departed from the battle, and shortly was standing in the foyer of Kay's building. Beginning from the left, he pressed bells in succession until the lock buzzed. He entered, and proceeded to her apartment on the third floor. He expected that he would have to go over the roof and come down the fire escape, but to his surprise the door was unlocked. She was at home. He held the door open an inch and listened, but heard no sound. She might be reading, in sight of the door, watching the door. At the other end of the hall a door opened, and a woman came to the head of the stairs. She peered down into the stair well and returned to her apartment muttering.

Gently Dolf pushed the door open as though a breeze were doing it. He entered with a quick stride, closed the door

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again with only the slightest click of the latch. He was in a narrow hall connecting living room and bedroom. His footsteps were soundless on the carpeting. In the doorway to the living room on the left he came to a halt and stared, thunderstruck.

Kay's apartment was haunt proof. It was a place from which to depart with all possible dispatch. In fact, it probably had haunts of its own already. There was a man lying slumped on the sofa across the room; it was big, red-headed Hoagie McCaffery, and he was dead. There was no bullet hole in evidence, but blood soaked the sofa behind him in a patch like wine. On the floor lay another body. It was Kathleen and her toes curled as though trying to grip the nap of the rug. She lay with arms outflung in a stretching position; there was a bullet hole in her right hand, another one just below her right eye. Dolf ran to the front door, stood undecided and then returned to the scene of crime.

Looking made him realize how far murder had been from his real intentions; all he had meant to do was scare the daylights out of her, just haunt her house a little bit, and possibly get her back through some maneuvering. He wanted her back like everything. He trembled, and his heart was beating so fast that it was just a lump of pain in his chest.

That Kay had had lovers there was no doubt in his mind; he wondered which one of them it was who had beaten him to the draw in committing murder. It wasn't a common burglar's or any outsider's work, he imagined; the name that occurred to him was Wilbur Huron.

Kay and Hoagie had been drinking. There was a coffee table in front of the sofa, and on it stood two partially consumed drinks—Scotch and soda. The ice cubes in the glasses were not yet melted, indicating that the crime was fairly recent. There was lipstick—Kay's—on Hoagie's mouth and cheek. On the floor, Kay's body was clad in diaphanous, lusterless triple-sheer; the robe was belted at the waist, and modeled her slenderness-revealingly in green shadows. Suspecting that she was two-timing him, Huron had paid a visit and found them preoccupied with one another. Probably the door had been locked and the jealous murderer came down the fire escape from the roof as Dolf had intended to. He checked up. The escape window was closed and locked, but that could have been done from the inside. And yes, there were marks on the iron slats of the platform made by shoes.

The murderer had come through the window. Using either the route through the corridor or bathroom, he had taken a look into the living room and seen all he needed to see. McCaffery had seen Huron standing there with a gun in his hand and had opened his mouth to yell. The first bullet had gone down Hoagie's throat, right between his teeth before he could bite it in two. That was why there was no apparent wound on his face. Kathleen had jumped up, covering her face with her hands, and the second bullet had gone through her hand and head.

The gall, the effrontery of that man Huron, exercising the privilege of being jealous of Dolf Ornstein's wife! Dolf was appalled. He looked down at himself and couldn't see himself except for the impression his bare feet made in the rug, but he scratched his head with marvelous indecision and got normal resistance. He was solid; he was still there.

Being invisible, of course, he was perfectly safe even if the cops came, but Huron must have departed very rapidly in case the two shots had been heard. Seemingly the two reports had reached no ears.

He was mistaken; the doorknob turned as he was reaching for it, and he

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jumped back, flattening himself against the corridor wall. A man stuck his head inside and looked in both directions, then came all the way inside, followed by another man—detectives. One headed for the living room and the other for the bedroom. Dolf made his exit between them through the door, which they had left open. At the head of the stairs he heard, "Hey, Tommy! Here in the living room; two of them!"

Dolf went down and stairs breathing fast to make up for the long one he had held in the corridor. On the sidewalk he started running lickety split for the subway. His heels took a terrific pounding, and his toes slapped down every time until they hurt like the mischief. They felt as though they were going to split open with the next stride.

Then he asked himself, "What the hell am I running for? I didn't do it."

PANTING for breath, he stood with his toes hanging over the edge of the curb near the corner to give them a rest. No, he hadn't murdered Kay and Hoagie, but the cops would certainly consider him as a possibility. It wouldn't take them long to discover that she was Mrs. Ornstein and that she had left his bed and board. Then they would discover that he had hired a private detective to find out where she lived. The thing for him to do was get home and fall asleep as quickly as possible so that he could get back inside of his clay. But he couldn't fall asleep now; he was too excited.

It was turning somewhat chill with the setting of the sun, and gooseflesh crawled on him here and there as eddies of breeze stirred moistly. Out in the garden the temperature of his clay would decline degree by degree. It ought to be lugged into the apartment and covered up warmly. But all around the garden were back windows and random housewives rubbernecking out of them. It wouldn't do for anyone to see his body levitate and go coasting through the French doors into the apartment in midair. Such a sight wouldn't be forgotten by anyone who saw it. Further and more, as Lonczewski would say, the clay would be better left out in plain sight now. It was his alibi. As far as anyone else knew, that was Adolf Hermann Ornstein snoozing down there in the chair in the garden. That gangster Ferronatti must have looked out the back window a couple of times since, and stared stilettos at the man who had knocked him cold. Good old Ferronatti. Other people must have looked out, too. There was that old hag, that white-haired lovable gentlewoman, who threw bread out her window every afternoon for the sparrows whose raw, piercing chirping used to drive Dolf crazy. The flock of Manhattan-gray birds got bigger every day. And there was that fat slob of a woman on the top floor, who would run her laundry out to the line post on screeching pulleys, almost every day, then rest her obese elbows on her window sill and contemplate the soapy wet line dripping diagonally across the garden below with eyes squeezed to slits by her cheeks. She spoke just enough English to tell him that that was her hook on the line post, and if it dripped, what was he going to do about it? Come on up! Oh, his clay wouldn't slumber down there in the garden unnoticed.

But he was getting chilly. Directly in front of him, waiting for the change of lights, was a roomy sedan. It was this year's model, and its only occupant was the driver. Dolf opened the rear door and stepped inside, sat on the plush. The driver's head snapped around; all he did was scowl, reach for the handle and haul the door shut with a slam; the lights changed and he turned uptown, shifting gears as though he were in a hurry.

The lights stopped the car again at Fourteenth Street, and Dolf got out because he didn't want to go uptown. An-

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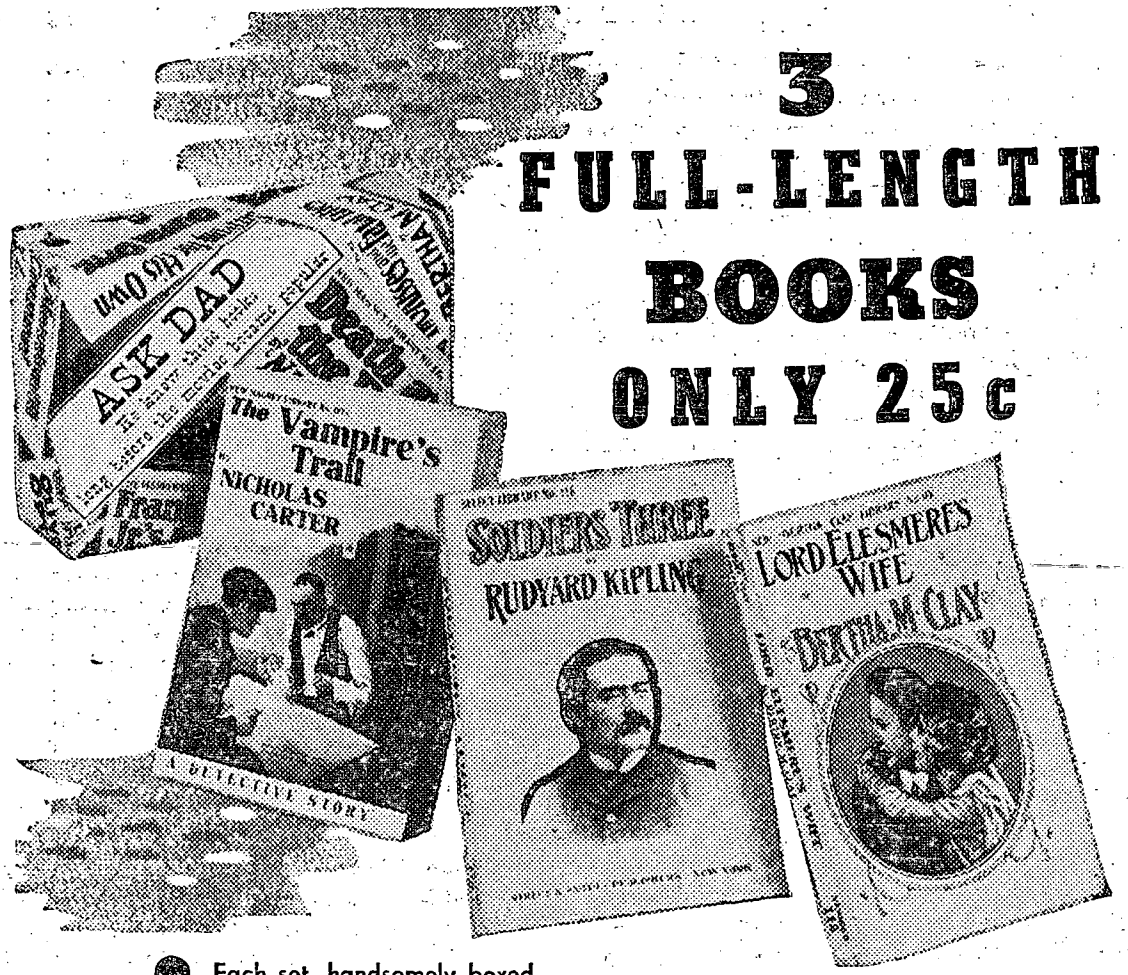

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other reason was that he had learned that car upholstery, if you are bare, is the most uncomfortable stuff in the world to sit on. It prickles like the devil.

There was a lot of pedestrian traffic on Fourteenth Street now, and windows were lighted, and Dolf had to keep on the jump. His toes got stepped on once when a man turned around without warning and walked into him upon some mysterious decision to walk in the opposite direction, and Dolf was momentarily nauseated by the pain. He slugged the pedestrian, who immediately swung at the nearest visible man within reach as his opponent. Dolf hopped along on one foot and leaned against a post, groaning and holding onto his mashed toes. Someone else wanted to lean against the post and watch the fight, and he had to move.

He limped to the corner, and crossed the street at a run while he had the lights with him, wishing that he had hit that fellow harder. Anyone who turned around suddenly without looking had a good sock coming from the person he bumped.

Suddenly it was dark. There had been light in the sky, but now there was only the luminous haze through which no stars can be seen. At regular intervals Dolf shuddered from the chill of the night air; he rubbed his shoulders briskly and embraced himself for the warmth provided. His feet hurt so much that he couldn't walk the distance home. When he got home he was going to have a good stiff drink, and fill the bathtub with water of the proper temperature, and laze in it. When he got out of the tub and scrubbed his invisible self with a Turkish towel, he would take a couple of sleeping tablets from the bottle in the medicine chest.

If his clay had caught cold already it was a small matter; he didn't like the idea of sleeping out in the garden all night, but there was no help for it. On the contrary, now that it was dark, he could lug his clay into the apartment unobserved. Well, drag it, because his hundred and sixty-eight pounds were a lot to lift. He might be seen, because the lights in the rear room were on, the front curtains up. People passing by could look into his apartment, but he would have to take chance on it. Pull the front curtains down first. Then lug his clay into bed, take a bath and swallow the tablets and lock the doors.

Probably the cops wouldn't get around to him tonight, anyhow. Poor Kay. But she had it coming to her, the conniving little money-hungry wench; he never would have got her back again.

He got into another car bound across town. This one had smooth cotton slipcovers on the prickly upholstery, and Dolf sat down in comfort. All the driver did was look back and scowl, reach for the handle and haul the door shut with a slam. But again he was out of luck and had to leave the car when it turned uptown. As he reached the curb a violent stab of pain shot through his head from temple to temple and remained at full intensity, like an embedded arrow. It nearly drove him to his knees; he staggered up to a store window and leaned against it, wondering what had happened.

The agony of it gradually lessened, and with a worried shake of his head he set out across town on foot. He couldn't take the normal pedestrian's chances ducking through traffic, and had to abide by the lights when crossing the avenues. He arrived at his address without further mishap.

ALL THE LIGHTS were on in his apartment, and several unpleasant-looking masculine customers were pacing about as though awaiting further arrivals. The basement gate was open. Numb with alarm, Dolf took the steps with a bound and raced down the basement corridor. He didn't stop at his

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own door, but continued on through the super's entrance into the garden. Light from the back room touched the green of the garden somberly and turned the foliage into mysterious submarine growths. Men stood around the chair in which his clay was propped, and with bulging eyes Dolf danced about looking over their shoulders. A man stooped to pick something up from the flagstones, and another detective ordered "Leave that there, Bridges; the photographer hasn't got here yet. The damn fool," he added, evidently referring to the clay in the chair.

There was a bullet hole through the clay's temple, and a dark spattering of blood on the flagstones produced when bullet and expanding gases from the muzzle of the pistol blew his brains out. The object which Bridges had almost touched was an object of dull, wicked gleams, a revolver which lay as though it had dropped from his clay's right hand.

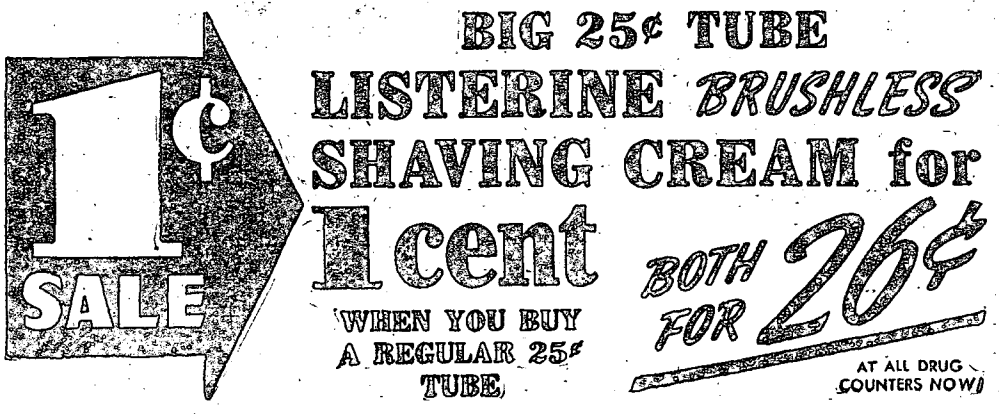
Among the detectives' conversations he heard the comment, "Killed his wife and the boy friend down on Waverly Place, then came back here and bumped himself."

Horror filled Dolf. That was his revolver lying there at his clay's feet, his own gun, for which he had a license. He had never used it, thought little of it when Kay took the weapon along with her when she left. The murderer had known where she kept the gun.

Oh, that clever Wilbur Huron! That slim, gloomy bird who looked like a spy. After killing Kay and Hoagie he had come here, and through the front grille had seen Dolf apparently sleeping in the garden. Light from the back room had illuminated the clay after dark. Huron had sneaked down the corridor to the janitor's door, slipped up to the slumbering clay. Put revolver muzzle to the clay's forehead—pulled the trigger—dropped the gun simultaneously and sprang to the safety of the building before any of the heads sticking out of the windows now could pop into view. That was the pain Dolf had left through his head down the street, so recently. As simple as that—pinning the two murders and "suitcide" on the helpless clay. That sinister Huron, sitting in a bar somewhere and chuckling to himself now.

Involuntarily Dolf screamed. He was still invisible, of course, so they couldn't locate him. The wild yell of fear reverberated from the back walls of the buildings, deafening in his own ears and certainly enough to make the steeliest nerves jangle. But no heads turned, no one paid any attention. Invisible jaw hanging, invisible eyes staring, Dolf felt of himself; in a conniption of horror he grabbed his shoulder, clapped himself on the chest.

He wasn't there any more.



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THE SUMMONS

By DON EVANS

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THE SUMMONS

A uniquely fine piece of sheer writing.

By Don Evans

DUNSTAN RAYNOR paused just before reaching the heavy oak door at the end of the small passage. For a moment he thought someone had called him. It was almost as though a restraining hand had been laid upon his shoulder. He peered earnestly about him in the half-light of the narrow space. Then he thought there was something he had forgotten to do. But it was not quite like that, either.

It was more like something he had had to do at the urge of some forgotten memory, and had started to do, when other events had intruded, leaving a sense of unfinished but urgent business. It was the sort of thing he had known he would forget and might have tied a string about his finger in order to remember. But there was no string on his finger any more than there was a hand on his shoulder.

He looked back the way he had come in some puzzlement, his dark eyes lost in doubt. He passed a well-kept hand over his glossy black hair and his long face, of almost satanic beauty, frowned in utter mystification. It was not the first time he had experienced the strange feeling. It was just like an inaudible voice coaxing him, begging him, pleading with him to do something, or go somewhere. Or, as though he had unwittingly fallen within the power of some hypnotic mind, some superior will, that was trying to bend him to its dictates.

There was a distinct feeling that he was being summoned. It was weak, however, like the voice on a badly tuned radio. It was not quite clear and distinguishable, yet, but growing more so at each occurrence.

After a moment, the feeling passed. He was just about to go on, when vague words came to him. Glancing up, he saw the black square of a ventilator in the ceiling. Somewhere in the rooms above, people were talking. Men's voices were audible but muted strangely by the acoustics of the shaft.

"Come on, now; you might as well tell us. You gave him the poison, didn't you? The druggist identifies you. The doctor says there was no such prescription. *You wanted him out of the way, because you loved his wife!*"

Staring up at the dark hole, Dunstan Raynor could have sworn that someone was up there looking down, speaking the words directly at him. He wondered if it had been some strange trick of sound that had brought him vague words of command from up there—words which he had heard, without conscious attention, and which he had applied to himself while thinking of other matters. But these words were quite different in effect. He felt no compulsion about answering.

He wondered what was going on up there.

The heavy oak door swung open as he approached and closed behind him. Regarding the great marble hall with pleasure, he crossed the smooth flagstones on noiseless feet, his slender, athletic figure moving with poise and assurance. There was a light of glad

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anticipation on his face.

A fountain was playing in the center of the hall. A circle of white pillars rose high about him. Beyond the gurgling fountain, with its thread of water persistently forcing its futile way upward, began the enormous stairs that curved upward on either hand to meet above, before the tall stained-glass windows.

There was a tame lion wandering by the fountain in majestic solitude. It glanced at him and came over to lick his hand. He rubbed the hairy muzzle. Tame as a kitten. No doubt a great pet of the fellow who owned this place. And by the way, who does own it?—he asked himself.

There were vines moving in the breeze outside the stained-glass windows. They dappled the marble stairs and balustrade with a moving kaleidoscope of color born of the hot afternoon sun. About halfway up the right-hand stairs a statue of Minerva rested in a niche. The play of light and shadow across the grave stone face made her blush and wink as he passed. He mounted the stairs with a skipping grace and light heart.

In the broad corridor above, he was just about to enter a bronze door when there came a sudden patter of high heels. Annabelle came from somewhere.

SHE WAS pulling on little white gloves and her face lit up with pleasure. His heart almost stopped as he turned toward her. She was glorious, so radiant, so vitally alive. Chestnut hair escaped in curls about her piquant face beneath the tight little red hat. Her eyes were soft and violet, like pansies. Her nose was too small, but all the more fascinating. Red lips were full and the lower one curled over; passionate little lips and selfish sometimes when she pouted, but adorable when she smiled. It was infectious, damnably alluring, and disturbing. He wanted his arms about her. It hurt to know that he could not.

"Darling," she said in that silvery voice that gurgled with happiness and sometimes mischief, "it's been ages since I've seen you! Why don't you come oftener?"

He was suddenly diffident and ill at ease. "You know why," he said.

She looked at him levelly as though a challenge lay at the back of those wide violet orbs. Then her arms were around his neck, warm soft little arms that clung with surprising strength. He felt himself swaying as she looked deep into his soul and saw the manhood ebb from him like water from a leaky vessel. Little waves of intoxicating perfume enveloped him. He was acutely aware of the deliberate pressure of small rounded breasts through the thin material of her dress. He could not force his eyes from hers. His head seemed to whirl in delirium.

"Kiss me," she said coolly. It was not coaxing, it was not commanding. It was said in a matter-of-fact voice as if she knew that no power on earth could stop him.

He was troubled. "Annabelle, you know we must not," he objected, trembling.

Her small hands forced his head down. When his arms had gone around her hungrily, in spite of himself, and when his lips had found hers crushingly, while his heart pumped flames instead of blood and they seemed to be wafted aloft to some gay fiery realm of ecstasy, she broke away from him suddenly with a hard little laugh. She started off with a little skip, sending a smile of triumph over her shoulder.

He suddenly felt cheap. The same old Annabelle, lovely as a flower, always wanting to know if she could arouse those emotions in him and twist him about her finger. There was a profound conviction that she was like that with every desirable man, calling the devil to life, in perfect safety to herself, for mere

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sport. He had the dim feeling of harpies fluttering in the air of the hall as she departed swiftly.

He had a brief glimpse of a man waiting by the balustrade on the landing, looking toward them with a smirk. The man was short, a little paunchy and dressed in a tuxedo. He had diamonds in his shirtfront, was polished, cultivated, but gross and vulgar somehow. A golden toad. His eyes were too wide apart and inclined to pop. There were bags under them. There was a loose mouth, a double chin and lines of dissipation—but rich, filthy rich. His five-thousand-dollar speedster was probably waiting outside in the bright summer sun.

Dunstan turned toward the door again with a frown. The feeling of pleasant anticipation he had experienced while mounting the stairs was gone. He felt guilty. Bitter. He opened the door and paused on the threshold.

The tall, blond man in the invalid chair was still looking at him fondly. Dunstan's thoughts were in such a whirl that he had not been conscious of the interview. He must have uttered the few banalities that came unconsciously to his lips and gotten the brief meeting over. He was already leaving instead of entering.

"And say, old man, drop by the drugstore and get me some sleeping tablets like a good fellow, will you?" queried Alan with his pleasant smile. "Haven't slept a wink in four nights. It's demolishing, you know."

"Yes, yes," agreed Dunstan absently and went out, closing the door behind him.

Annabelle's kisses still burned his lips. It was damnably unfair. And Alan so helpless. He frowned in ill-humor and went on, shaking his head.

"No. I must never tell them, must never tell anyone that her husband committed suicide because she was unfaithful."

HE HURRIED down the short, gloomy corridor and took a narrow stairway that wound and twisted down, down, between cold, stone walls. He came to a landing with a door on his left. Pausing at the sound of voices from beyond the door, he thought he recognized a deep voice speaking quietly, forcefully. The door was locked so he placed his ear furtively to the thin boards.

"Alienists for the State quite agree with those for the defense. We ask that the case be dropped on the grounds of obvious and hopeless insanity, and that the defendant be confined to a suitable institution for the remainder of his life."

"You can't do that!"

Dunstan Raynor whirled and peered into the darkness behind him at the answering remark, which had seemed to come from directly over his own shoulder.

"Who said that?" he demanded fiercely.

There was no reply, and he could see no one in the blackness. The voices from beyond the door had ceased. He went on down the remaining steps, much puzzled. The words were vaguely familiar as if it was something he had read somewhere a long time ago, but they had no particular significance at present.

A door gave out onto a dark alley, where naught was visible in the velvety gloom of midnight save a single electric globe beneath an arch some distance away. He made progress with difficulty. The alley was muddy and piled with boxes and rubbish. Beyond the arch was a narrow street, paved with cobblestones, where queer old buildings leaned drunkenly. He saw a gas lamp a block away throwing a feeble radiance over a faded front. He turned into a small door with leaded panes in the upper half.

The apothecary was a little man with round, red face and gray whiskers. He beamed as he turned to the laden shelves.

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There were bottles in all shapes and sizes—bottles of amber, red and green liquids, bottles with powders, and bottles with tablets.

"Nice day," observed the little man genially, like some Santa Claus in civilian dress, as he wrapped the small package.

But, as he handed it over the counter, he suddenly paused and drew back his hand. His eyes became surprised, alarmed, and then stern. He pointed an accusing finger at Dunstan and said excitedly:

"That's the man. He purchased the tablets."

"No. No," responded Dunstan in fright. "It wasn't that way at all."

He turned and ran for the door as the little man hopped over the counter like a flea. Outside, in cold darkness, he ran down first one narrow corridor and then another. Passageway and tunnels seemed endless. There were doors everywhere. After a while, he paused exhausted. The corridor he was in went on and on. It was painted a deadly dull gray, loathsome and horrible. Tired of wandering down strange passageways, he opened a door. The boards echoed hollowly under his feet as he passed through. It was another corridor of the same oppressive gray. There were more doors, but these doors were barred with iron.

An old woman came to the nearest door and stretched forth beseeching hands toward him. She had on some sort of coarse gray gown. Her matted hair fell in strings over her eyes. They stared and rolled, goggling at him wildly.

"It's better that way," she croaked. "Green, you know. Everybody does. Continue the going dreadfully. It's not often quite frequently, isn't it?"

With a start of horror, he recognized the place. There was a door farther down with the number fifteen over it. It was there they had put him. But not without a fight over it. He remembered the struggle he had had with three white-coated attendants.

Another door at the end of the passage opened, and a white-gowned figure came through. It was the blond German doctor he hated. The latter caught sight of him and raised an imperious finger.

"Here, you! What are you doing outside?"

"I'm not outside," he responded sullenly. "I'm in here."

"Of course, you're in here," said the doctor.

As the man started forward menacingly, Dunstan Raynor turned and ran blindly, stumblingly, in a panic, while footsteps echoed behind.

Turning the corner of a dingy, brick building, he saw steps leading downward. Stone steps. There was a sort of tunnel below. It was black as pitch but it offered sanctuary, and he hurried down. Anything to escape the strait jacket he knew he would be in again if the doctor caught him.

HE BUMPED into a door. Opening it, he came out in the great hall with the fountain. Music was playing, and a great many people were laughing. It must be a fancy-dress ball. Here was a knight in armor dancing stiffly with a graceful ballet girl. There was a pirate with a Columbine on his arm. There was a short man with a hideous mask. A figure with a frog's head. A skeleton.

But something unusual was going on. A platform had been built between the two curving stairs. He saw Annabelle there all in white, and Benny Westcott, the golden toad, in formal dress. Confetti was raining down upon them. They were being married.

He slouched forward bitterly and looked on. She would, he thought. And upstairs, poor twisted Alan was waiting to take those tablets. Not the one that would produce peaceful sleep, but the

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dozen or more that would put him out of all this. If these people only knew what was going to happen they would not laugh and be so gay. Or would they? But he knew what was going to happen! God! If he had only known in time.

The couple were married now and being congratulated. They looked over and saw him. Dunstan started and flushed red. A white-hot anger shook him.

The golden toad was *grinning*.

Westcott simpered like the cat that ate the canary. There was even a smile lurking in Annabelle's eyes as she regarded him. Then she came hurrying toward him.

"Darling!" she cooed. "I think it was perfectly marvelous, what you did. Oh! It was taking horrible chances. And all for me! I love you, Dunsy."

She would have kissed him, but he turned and fled. The dirty little beast thought she had driven him to it for love of her! And the grinning toad was enjoying the joke. They were laughing at him. That's what hurt.

"God!" he cried in anguish.

MAKING his way down a long hallway, he came to a black door. There was a thin man all in sober black beside the door. The man's face was cadaverous and gloomy, but that might be a mask, too. He seemed kindly and opened the door politely for Dunstan to pass through.

The walls were all in plain black. There was a small platform by the farther wall and on it a huge square chair with heavy wires connected to it. There was a copper helmet, armbands, and legbands. There were heavy switches on the wall to one side.

The man was standing by the chair. He smiled politely and motioned for Dunstan to have a seat.

"Get in," he said. "It only takes a minute."

His smile seemed to grow evil, wolfish.

"Now look here," replied Dunstan severely. "This has gone far enough. I tell you I didn't do it. He took the tablets himself. How was I to know he wanted them for that purpose?"

Alan was there, too, standing quietly in one corner. He was no longer in the wheel chair but was standing straight and strong as before the accident.

"Sorry, old man," he said. "If I'd known they would blame you, I never would have done it that way."

The other man leered at Dunstan. "But it's too late to tell them," he pointed out. "No one would believe you, now. You're stark, raving mad, you see. Your testimony is worthless."

"You should have told them why I did it," added Alan quietly. "It wasn't worth it, old man."

"I wouldn't change it if I could," said Dunstan fervently. "And they're trying to get me back. I've felt it a dozen times, lately. Each time it is stronger. But I won't go back. Do you think I'd stand for that slimy little toad, Westcott, thinking I killed you so that I could marry Annabelle, when she married *him* instead? I tell you, he *grinned* at me."

"Get in," interrupted the other man impatiently.

"No!" shouted Dunstan. "Not that!"

The man took a step forward, mouthing horribly. For the first time, Dunstan noticed little horns on the man's head. His mouth was full of ugly teeth. God! He had the slavering jaws of a wolf.

Dunstan started back. The man swooped through the air toward him. He had great black wings, like a bat.

Screaming, Dunstan turned and ran at top speed while the sound of flapping wings and running feet came from behind. Doubling and dodging down narrow, twisting corridors, he finally

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outdistanced pursuit. He stopped suddenly, that strange feeling seizing hold as though it were a powerful hand throttling him.

"No. I won't go back," he said stubbornly.

WHEN he reached the end of the corridor, he saw light coming through a thick glass window. He peered in furtively. The room was glaring white under a cluster of powerful lights—cases of glittering instruments, sterilizers. Four white-robed men were gathered about a swathed figure on an operating table beneath the lights. Nurses flitted about soberly and efficiently. There was an atmosphere of suspense.

The doctors' voices came plainly.

"It would be interesting to know what goes on in a mind like this as it hears the call of returning sanity."

"But, have you ever stopped to think that some of these people may not thank us? They may regret recovering."

"Why?"

"Well, take this case, for instance. It is a sad case. He poisoned his best friend in order to marry the wife, and she immediately married another man. If he recovers completely, will he not find himself again in the situation that drove him mad? If he could not stand it fourteen years ago, will he be able to stand it tomorrow, or the next day?"

"I see. That's a good point. You fear a brief period of sanity and a relapse?"

"Yes."

"On the other hand, time works wonders in such cases. When you wake in the morning you are conscious of considerable time having elapsed since you went to sleep. I'm counting on the long period of fourteen years to exercise some curative effect."

"Well, we shall know more when the shock wears off."

The people were gone and still Dunstan stared at the white shrouded figure on the table. It wasn't possible they were talking about him. Fourteen years! Yet the poor devil in there had an almost identical case.

Of a sudden the strange feeling came again. It was overpowering. He fought against it, trembling and perspiring. Then the white swathed figure turned its head toward him. It raised a hand and mutely beckoned, imperiously.

With a sigh, he gave up. What was the use of fighting it? At least there would be no more hurrying aimlessly down unending corridors, opening countless doors, or listening when they were locked. He had been down hundreds of miles of corridors and hallways and passages. There had been thousands of doors that he had tried only to find them locked against him or leading nowhere.

Silently he went in and crawled up on the empty operating table. It was good to stretch out, and he felt at peace again. He thought he would go to sleep. But his serenity was disturbed by the sound of hurrying feet. For an agonized moment he thought that the man, or the wolf, or the bat—whatever it had been—was still hunting him and had caught up.

Annabelle burst in.

"Oh, darling!" she gasped, throwing herself upon him and kissing him madly. "Just think what it means to us. I'm free! Pudgy hit a bridge abutment, doing ninety in his racer, and I have all his money. Now, if the operation is a success, you will be free, too! Darling, think of you and me together."

He tried to raise a hand to push her away. In horror, he discovered that someone had strapped him down. His feet were similarly tied. Great, broad straps fastened him to the table. He struggled futilely as she kissed him again and again. He groaned in anguish.

God! His mouth felt cold and wet and slimy, like a dead oyster. It was

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like being attacked by an octopus.

"Take her away, somebody!" he shouted.

SHE raised up and studied him gravely. He shut his eyes tight for a moment, loathing the face that had once driven him mad. When he opened his eyes again, he examined her in astonishment. He had never noticed that her eyes were brown before. And there were freckles on her nose. Her hair was red, and what was that dinky-looking cap thing doing on top of it? She looked like a nurse. She was a nurse.

In consternation, he stared about the room. It was like most hospital rooms, very plain, with a bed, a dresser, a chair. The windows were open, and a bright hot sun was shining in. There was a cool breeze billowing the white curtain.

He saw that the nurse had not been kissing him at all. She had a pad of wet gauze in her hand and had been wiping his mouth. On closer inspection, he saw that she was not anything like Annabelle.

"Where are all those people who had me strapped down?" he queried.

"Oh, that was hours ago, in the operating room," she replied. "I shall have to tell Dr. Pembroke that the shock of the insulin has worn off and that you seem quite normal."

"Wait a moment," he said quickly, as she turned to go. "Are you familiar with my case?"

"Yes."

"Do you know Mrs. Benjamin Westcott, who was Mrs. Alan Dunbar?"

"She's a Mrs. Somebody Else now," the nurse replied. "I can't recollect the name. She's married again and lives in Europe. Mr. Westcott was killed some years ago in an auto accident."

Her eyes were a little cold, aloof and impersonal.

"But I didn't do it, you know," he insisted.

"Yes, we know."

He studied her gloomily. People would always be like that. If he were cured, after all these years, he might be freed, but other people would never be cured. To them he would always be the murderer of Alan because he loved Alan's wife.

But what of it? Alan knew.

Pembroke had been right. Time had worked changes whether he had been aware of the process or not.

"My heavens!" he exclaimed. "Have you a mirror?"

She went to the dresser and fetched one. He studied his reflection a long time, critically. His hair was white, his face deep-lined. Fourteen years since he had seen that face. Amazing changes. But, on the whole, not bad.

"What are you worrying about now?" the nurse asked.

"I'm considering the relapse," he replied, briefly. And then, at her questioning look. "One of the other fellows down there said I might have one."

"Were you conscious at that time?" she queried sharply, a worried look making a little crease between her brows.

He didn't answer immediately for he was still looking into the glass and thinking deeply. Imagine Annabelle after three husbands, a fortune to squander, and fourteen years. He tried to picture her with gray hair and wrinkled skin. He suddenly found he was not interested in picturing her in any fashion.

"Were you conscious?" she repeated.

"You'd be surprised," he grinned.

"I'm more than surprised; I'm dumfounded. I've never heard of such a thing. I shall have to tell Dr. Pembroke at once."

But, as she reached the door, he raised his head again to look after her. "However," he said gravely, "you might tell the other fellow something."

She cast an inquiring glance back over her shoulder, her hand on the knob.

Dunstan Raynor chuckled. "Tell him there will be no relapse," he said.

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THE GNARLY MAN

By L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

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THE GNARLY MAN

Meet Clarence Aloysius Gaffney—who might, you know, be that queer-looking fellow down the block!

By L. Sprague de Camp

DR. MATILDA SADDLER first saw the gnarly man on the evening of June 14, 1946, at Coney Island.

The spring meeting of the Eastern Section of the American Anthropological Association had broken up, and Dr. Saddler had had dinner with two of her professional colleagues, Blue of Columbia and Jeffcott of Yale. She mentioned that she had never visited Coney, and meant to go there that evening. She urged Blue and Jeffcott to come along, but they begged off.

Watching Dr. Saddler's retreating back, Blue of Columbia cackled: "The Wild Woman from Wichita. Wonder if she's hunting another husband?" He was a thin man with a small gray beard and a who-the-hell-are-you-sir expression.

"How many has she had?" asked Jeffcott of Yale.

"Two to date. Don't know why anthropologists lead the most disorderly private lives of any scientists. Must be that they study the customs and morals of all these different peoples, and ask themselves, 'If the Eskimos can do it, why can't we?' I'm old enough to be safe, thank God."

"I'm not afraid of her," said Jeffcott. He was in his early forties and looked like a farmer uneasy in store clothes. "I'm so very thoroughly married."

"Yeah? Ought to have been at Stanford a few years ago, when she was there. Wasn't safe to walk across the campus, with Tuthill chasing all the females and Saddler all the males."

DR. SADDLER had to fight her way off the subway train, as the adolescents who infest the platform of the B. M. T.'s Stillwell Avenue station are probably the worst-mannered people on earth, possibly excepting the Dobu Islanders, of the western Pacific. She didn't much mind. She was a tall, strongly built woman in her late thirties, who had been kept in trim by the outdoor rigors of her profession. Besides, some of the inane remarks in Swift's paper on acculturation among the Arapaho Indians had gotten her fighting blood up.

Walking down Surf Avenue toward Brighton Beach, she looked at the concessions without trying them, preferring to watch the human types that did and the other human types that took their money. She did try a shooting gallery, but found knocking tin owls off their perch with a .22 too easy to be much fun. Long-range work with an army rifle was her idea of shooting.

The concession next to the shooting gallery would have been called a side show if there had been a main show for it to be a side show to. The usual lurid banner proclaimed the uniqueness of the two-headed calf, the bearded woman, Arachne the spider girl, and other marvels. The pièce de résistance was Ungo-Bungo, the ferocious ape-man, captured in the Congo at a cost of twenty-seven lives. The picture showed an enormous

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Ungo-Bungo squeezing a hapless Negro in each hand, while others sought to throw a net over him.

Dr. Saddler knew perfectly well that the ferocious ape-man would turn out to be an ordinary Caucasian with false hair on his chest. But a streak of whimsicality impelled her to go in. Perhaps, she thought, she could have some fun with her colleagues about it.

The spieler went through his leather-lunged harangue. Dr. Saddler guessed from his expression that his feet hurt. The tattooed lady didn't interest her, as her decorations obviously had no cultural significance, as they have among the Polynesians. As for the ancient Mayan, Dr. Saddler thought it in questionable taste to exhibit a poor microcephalic idiot that way. Professor Yogi's legerdemain and fire eating weren't bad.

There was a curtain in front of Ungo-Bungo's cage. At the appropriate moment there were growls and the sound of a length of chain being slapped against a metal plate. The spieler wound up on a high note: "—ladies and gentlemen, the one and only UNGO-BUNGO!" The curtain dropped.

The ape-man was squatting at the back of his cage. He dropped his chain, got up, and shuffled forward. He grasped two of the bars and shook them. They were appropriately loose and rattled alarmingly. Ungo-Bungo snarled at the patrons, showing his even, yellow teeth.

DR. SADDLER stared hard. This was something new in the ape-man line. Ungo-Bungo was about five feet three, but very massive, with enormous hunched shoulders. Above and below his blue swimming trunks thick, grizzled hair covered him from crown to ankle. His short, stout-muscled arms ended in big hands with thick, gnarled fingers. His neck projected slightly forward, so that from the front he seemed to have but little neck at all.

His face—well, thought Dr. Saddler, she knew all the living races of men, and all the types of freak brought about by glandular maladjustment, and none of them had a face like *that*. It was deeply lined. The forehead between the short scalp hair and the brows on the huge superorbital ridges receded sharply. The nose, although wide, was not apelike; it was a shortened version of the thick, hooked Armenoid nose, so often miscalled Jewish. The face ended in a long upper lip and a retreating chin. And the yellowish skin apparently belonged to Ungo-Bungo.

The curtain was whisked up again.

Dr. Saddler went out with the others, but paid another dime, and soon was back inside. She paid no attention to the spieler, but got a good position in front of Ungo-Bungo's cage before the rest of the crowd arrived.

Ungo-Bungo repeated his performance with mechanical precision. Dr. Saddler noticed that he limped a little as he came forward to rattle the bars, and that the skin under his mat of hair bore several big whitish scars. The last joint of his left ring finger was missing. She noted certain things about the proportions of his shin and thigh, of his forearm and upper arm, and his big splay feet.

Dr. Saddler paid a third dime. An idea was knocking at her mind somewhere. If she let it in, either she was crazy or physical anthropology was haywire or—something. But she knew that if she did the sensible thing, which was to go home, the idea would plague her from now on.

After the third performance she spoke to the spieler. "I think your Mr. Ungo-Bungo used to be a friend of mine. Could you arrange for me to see him after he finishes?"

The spieler checked his sarcasm. His questioner was so obviously not a—not the sort of dame who asks to see guys

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after they finish.

"Oh, him," he said. "Calls himself Gaffney—Clarence Aloysius Gaffney. That the guy you want?"

"Why, yes."

"I guess you can." He looked at his watch. "He's got four more turns to do before we close. I'll have to ask the boss. He popped through a curtain and called, "Hey, Morrie!" Then he was back. "It's O. K. Morrie says you can wait in his office. Foist door to the right."

Morrie was stout, bald, and hospitable. "Sure, sure," he said, waving his cigar. "Glad to be of soivice, Miss Saddler. Chust a min while I talk to Gaffney's manager." He stuck his head out. "Hey, Pappas! Lady wants to talk to your ape-man later. I meant *lady*. O. K." He returned to orate on the difficulties besetting the freak business. "You take this Gaffney, now. He's the best damn ape-man in the business; all that hair rilly grows outa him. And the poor guy rilly has a face like that. But do people believe it? No! I hear 'em going out, saying about how the hair is pasted on, and the whole thing is a fake. It's mawtifying." He cocked his head, listening. "That rumble wasn't no rolly-coaster; it's gonna rain. Hope it's over by tomorrow. You wouldn't believe the way a rain can knock ya receipts off. If you drew a coive, it would be like this." He drew his finger horizontally through space, jerking it down sharply to indicate the effect of rain. "But as I said, people don't appreciate what you try to do for 'em. It's not just the money; I think of myself as an ottist. A creative ottist. A show like this got to have balance and propawtion, like any other ott—"

IT MUST have been an hour later when a slow, deep voice at the door said: "Did somebody want to see me?"

The gnarly man was in the doorway. In street clothes, with the collar of his raincoat turned up and his hat brim pulled down, he looked more or less human, though the coat fitted his great, sloping shoulders badly. He had a thick, knobby walking stick with a leather loop near the top end. A small, dark man fidgeted behind him.

"Yeah," said Morrie, interrupting his lecture. "Clarence, this is Miss Saddler. Miss Saddler, this is Mr. Gaffney, one of our outstanding creative ottists."

"Pleased to meetcha," said the gnarly man. "This is my manager, Mr. Pappas."

Dr. Saddler explained, and said she'd like to talk to Mr. Gaffney if she might. She was tactful; you had to be to pry into the private affairs of Naga headhunters, for instance. The gnarly man said he'd be glad to have a cup of coffee with Miss Saddler; there was a place around the corner that they could reach without getting wet.

As they started out, Pappas followed, fidgeting more and more. The gnarly man said: "Oh, go home to bed, John. Don't worry about me." He grinned at Dr. Saddler. The effect would have been unnerving to anyone but an anthropologist. "Every time he sees me talking to anybody, he thinks it's some other manager trying to steal me." He spoke general American, with a suggestion of Irish brogue in the lowering of the vowels in words like "man" and "talk." "I made the lawyer who drew up our contract fix it so it can be ended on short notice."

Pappas departed, still looking suspicious. The rain had practically ceased. The gnarly man stepped along smartly despite his limp.

A woman passed with a fox terrier on a leash. The dog sniffed in the direction of the gnarly man, and then to all appearances went crazy, yelping and slavering. The gnarly man shifted his grip on the massive stick and said quietly, "Better hang onto him, ma'am." The woman departed hastily. "They

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just don't like me," commented Gaffney. "Dogs, that is."

They found a table and ordered their coffee. When the gnarly man took off his raincoat, Dr. Saddler became aware of a strong smell of cheap perfume. He got out a pipe with a big knobby bowl. It suited him, just as the walking stick did. Dr. Saddler noticed that the deep-sunk eyes under the beetling arches were light hazel.

"Well?" he said in his rumbling drawl.

She began her questions.

"My parents were Irish," he answered. "But I was born in South Boston . . . let's see . . . forty-six years ago. I can get you a copy of my birth certificate. Clarence Aloysius Gaffney, May 2, 1900." He seemed to get some secret amusement out of that statement.

"Were either of your parents of your somewhat unusual physical type?"

He paused before answering. He al-always did, it seemed. "Uh-huh. Both of 'em. Glands, I suppose."

"Were they both born in Ireland?"

"Yep. County Sligo." Again that mysterious twinkle.

She thought. "Mr. Gaffney, you wouldn't mind having some photographs and measurements made, would you? You could use the photographs in your business."

"Maybe." He took a sip. "Ouch! Gazooks, that's hot!"

"What?"

"I said the coffee's hot."

"I mean, before that."

The gnarly man looked a little embarrassed. "Oh, you mean the 'gazooks'? Well, I . . . uh . . . once knew a man who used to say that."

"Mr. Gaffney, I'm a scientist, and I'm not trying to get anything out of you for my own sake. You can be frank with me."

There was something remote and impersonal in his stare that gave her a slight spinal chill. "Meaning that I haven't been so far?"

"Yes. When I saw you I decided that there was something extraordinary in your background. I still think there is. Now, if you think I'm crazy, say so and we'll drop the subject. But I want to get to the bottom of this."

HE TOOK his time about answering. "That would depend." There was another pause. Then he said: "With your connections, do you know any really first-class surgeons?"

"But . . . yes, I know Dunbar."

"The guy who wears a purple gown when he operates? The guy who wrote a book on 'God, Man, and the Universe'?"

"Yes. He's a good man, in spite of his theatrical mannerisms. Why? What would you want of him?"

"Not what you're thinking. I'm satisfied with my . . . uh . . . unusual physical type. But I have some old injuries—broken bones that didn't knit properly—that I want fixed up. He'd have to be a good man, though. I have a couple of thousand dollars in the savings bank, but I know the sort of fees those guys charge. If you could make the necessary arrangements—"

"Why, yes, I'm sure I could. In fact, I could guarantee it. Then I *was* right? And you'll—" She hesitated.

"Come clean? Uh-huh. But remember, I can still prove I'm Clarence Aloysius if I have to."

"Who *are* you, then?"

Again there was a long pause. Then the gnarly man said: "Might as well tell you. As soon as you repeat any of it, you'll have put your professional reputation in my hands, remember.

"First off, I wasn't born in Massachusetts. I was born on the upper Rhine, near Mommenheim. And I was born, as nearly as I can figure out, about the year 50,000 B. C."

Matilda Saddler wondered whether she'd stumbled on the biggest thing in

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anthropology, or whether this bizarre personality was making Baron Munchausen look like a piker.

He seemed to guess her thoughts. "I can't prove that, of course. But so long as you arrange about that operation, I don't care whether you believe me or not."

"But . . . but . . . *how?*"

"I think the lightning did it. We were out trying to drive some bison into a pit. Well, this big thunderstorm came up, and the bison bolted in the wrong direction. So we gave up and tried to find shelter. And the next thing I knew I was lying on the ground with the rain running over me, and the rest of the clan standing around wailing about what had they done to get the storm god sore at them, so he made a bull's-eye on one of their best hunters. They'd never said *that* about me before. It's funny how you're never appreciated while you're alive.

"But I was alive, all right. My nerves were pretty well shot for a few weeks, but otherwise I was O. K., except for some burns on the soles of my feet. I don't know just what happened, except I was reading a couple of years ago that scientists had located the machinery that controls the replacement of tissue in the medulla oblongata. I think maybe the lightning did something to my medulla to speed it up. Anyway, I never got any older after that. Physically, that is. I was thirty-three at the time, more or less. We didn't keep track of ages. I look older now, because the lines in your face are bound to get sort of set after a few thousand years, and because our hair was always gray at the ends. But I can still tie an ordinary *Homo sapiens* in a knot if I want to."

"Then you're . . . you mean to say you're . . . you're trying to tell me you're—"

"A Neanderthal man? *Homo neanderthalensis?* That's right."

MATILDA SADDLER'S hotel room was a bit crowded, with the gnarly man, the frosty Blue, the rustic Jeffcott, Dr. Saddler herself, and Harold McGannon, the historian. This McGannon was a small man, very neat and pink-skinned. He looked more like a New York Central director than a professor. Just now his expression was one of fascination. Dr. Saddler looked full of pride; Professor Jeffcott looked interested but puzzled; Dr. Blue looked bored—he hadn't wanted to come in the first place. The gnarly man, stretched out in the most comfortable chair and puffing his overgrown pipe, seemed to be enjoying himself.

McGannon was formulating a question. "Well, Mr.—Gaffney? I suppose that's your name as much as any."

"You might say so," said the gnarly man. "My original name meant something like Shining Hawk. But I've gone under hundreds of names since then. If you register in a hotel as 'Shining Hawk,' it's apt to attract attention. And I try to avoid that."

"Why?" asked McGannon.

The gnarly man looked at his audience as one might look at willfully stupid children. "I don't like trouble. The best way to keep out of trouble is not to atract attention. That's why I have to pull up stakes and move every ten or fifteen years. People might get curious as to why I never got any older."

"Pathological liar," murmured Blue. The words were barely audible, but the gnarly man heard them.

"You're entitled to your opinion, Dr. Blue," he said affably. "Dr. Saddler's doing me a favor, so in return I'm letting you all shoot questions at me. And I'm answering. I don't give a damn whether you believe me or not."

McGannon hastily threw in another question. "How is it that you have a birth certificate, as you say you have?"

"Oh, I knew a man named Clarence Gaffney once. He got killed by an auto-

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mobile, and I took his name."

"Was there any reason for picking this Irish background?"

"Are you Irish, Dr. McGannon?"

"Not enough to matter."

"O. K. I didn't want to hurt any feelings. It's my best bet. There are real Irishmen with upper lips like mine."

Dr. Saddler broke in. "I meant to ask you, Clarence." She put a lot of warmth into his name. "There's an argument as to whether your people interbred with mine, when mine overran Europe at the end of the Mousterian. Some scientists have thought that some modern Europeans, especially along the west coast of Ireland, might have a little Neanderthal blood."

He grinned slightly. "Well—yes and no. There never was any back in the stone age, as far as I know. But these long-lipped Irish are my fault."

"How?"

"Believe it or not, but in the last fifty centuries there have been some women of your species that didn't find me too repulsive. Usually there were no offspring. But in the sixteenth century I went to Ireland to live. They were burning too many people for witchcraft in the rest of Europe to suit me at that time. And there was a woman. The result this time was a flock of hybrids—cute little devils, they were. So the Irishmen who look like me are my descendants."

"What did happen to your people?" asked McGannon. "Were they killed off?"

THE GNARLY MAN shrugged. "Some of them. We weren't at all warlike. But then the tall ones, as we called them, weren't, either. Some of the tribes of the tall ones looked on us as legitimate prey, but most of them let us severely alone. I guess they were almost as scared of us as we were of them. Savages as primitive as that are really pretty peaceable people. You have to work so hard to keep fed, and there are so few of you, that there's no object in fighting wars. That comes later, when you get agriculture and livestock, so you have something worth stealing.

"I remember that a hundred years after the tall ones had come, there were still Neanderthalers living in my part of the country. But they died out. I think it was that they lost their ambition. The tall ones were pretty crude, but they were so far ahead of us that our things and our customs seemed silly. Finally we just sat around and lived on what scraps we could beg from the tall ones' camps. You might say we died of an inferiority complex."

"What happened to you?" asked McGannon.

"Oh, I was a god among my own people by then, and naturally I represented them in their dealings with the tall ones. I got to know the tall ones pretty well, and they were willing to put up with me after all my own clan were dead. Then in a couple of hundred years they'd forgotten all about my people, and took me for a hunchback or something. I got to be pretty good at flint working, so I could earn my keep. When metal came in, I went into that, and finally into blacksmithing. If you'd put all the horseshoes I've made in a pile, they'd—well, you'd have a damn big pile of horseshoes, anyway."

"Did you . . . ah . . . limp at that time?" asked McGannon.

"Uh-huh. I busted my leg back in the Neolithic. Fell out of a tree, and had to set it myself, because there wasn't anybody around. Why?"

"Vulcan," said McGannon softly.

"Vulcan?" repeated the gnarly man. "Wasn't he a Greek god or something?"

"Yes. He was the lame blacksmith of the gods."

"You mean you think that maybe somebody got the idea from me? That's an interesting theory. Little late to

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check up on it, though."

Blue leaned forward and said crisply: "Mr. Gaffney, no real Neanderthal man could talk as fluently and entertainingly as you do. That's shown by the poor development of the frontal lobes of the brain and the attachments of the tongue muscles."

The gnarly man shrugged again. "You can believe what you like. My own clan considered me pretty smart, and then you're bound to learn something in fifty thousand years."

Dr. Saddler beamed. "Tell them about your teeth, Clarence."

The gnarly man grinned. "They're false, of course. My own lasted a long time, but they still wore out somewhere back in the Paleolithic. I grew a third set, and they wore out, too. So I had to invent soup."

"You *what?*" It was the usually taciturn Jeffcott.

"I had to invent soup, to keep alive. You know, the bark-dish-and-hot-stones method. My gums got pretty tough after a while, but they still weren't much good for chewing hard stuff. So after a few thousand years I got pretty sick of soup and mushy foods generally. And when metal came in I began experimenting with false teeth. I finally made some pretty good ones. Bone teeth in copper plates. You might say I invented them, too. I tried often to sell them, but they never really caught on until around 1750 A. D. I was living in Paris then, and I built up quite a little business before I moved on." He pulled the handkerchief out of his breast pocket to wipe his forehead; Blue made a face as the wave of perfume reached him.

"Well, Mr. Shining Hawk," snapped Blue with a trace of sarcasm, "how do you like our machine age?"

The gnarly man ignored the tone of the question. "It's not bad. Lots of interesting things happen. The main trouble is the shirts."

"Shirts?"

"Uh-huh. Just try to buy a shirt with a twenty neck and a twenty-nine sleeve. I have to order 'em special. It's almost as bad with hats and shoes. I wear an eight and one half hat and a thirteen shoe." He looked at his watch. "I've got to get back to Coney to work."

McGannon jumped up. "Where can I get in touch with you again, Mr. Gaffney? There's lots of things I'd like to ask you."

The gnarly man told him. "I'm free mornings. My working hours are two to midnight on weekdays, with a couple of hours off for dinner. Union rules, you know."

"You mean there's a union for you show people?"

"Sure. Only they call it a guild. They think they're artists, you know. Artists don't have unions; they have guilds. But it amounts to the same thing."

BLUE AND JEFFCOTT saw the gnarly man and the historian walking slowly toward the subway together. Blue said: "Poor old Mac! Always thought he had sense. Looks like he's swallowed this Gaffney's ravings, hook, line, and sinker."

"I'm not so sure," said Jeffcott, frowning. "There's something funny about the business."

"What?" barked Blue. "Don't tell me that *you* believe this story of being alive fifty thousand years? A caveman who uses perfume! Good God!"

"N-no," said Jeffcott. "Not the fifty thousand part. But I don't think it's a simple case of paranoia or plain lying, either. And the perfume's quite logical, if he were telling the truth."

"Huh?"

"Body odor. Saddler told us how dogs hate him. He'd have a smell different from ours. We're so used to ours that we don't even know we have one, unless somebody goes without a bath for a month. But we might notice his if

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he didn't disguise it."

Blue snorted. "You'll be believing him yourself in a minute. It's an obvious glandular case, and he's made up this story to fit. All that talk about not caring whether we believe him or not is just bluff. Come on, let's get some lunch. Say, see the way Saddler looked at him every time she said 'Clarence'? Like a hungry wolf. Wonder what she thinks she's going to do with him?"

Jeffcott thought. "I can guess. And if he *is* telling the truth, I think there's something in Deuteronomy against it."

THE GREAT surgeon made a point of looking like a great surgeon, to pince-nez and Vandyke. He waved the X-ray negatives at the gnarly man, pointing out this and that.

"We'd better take the leg first," he said. "Suppose we do that next Thursday. When you've recovered from that we can tackle the shoulder. It'll all take time, you know."

The gnarly man agreed, and shuffled out of the little private hospital to where McGannon awaited him in his car. The gnarly man described the tentative schedule of operations, and mentioned that he had made arrangements to quit his job. "Those two are the main thing," he said. "I'd like to try professional wrestling again some day, and I can't unless I get this shoulder fixed so I can raise my left arm over my head."

"What happened to it?" asked McGannon.

The gnarly man closed his eyes, thinking. "Let me see. I get things mixed up sometimes. People do when they're only fifty years old, so you can imagine what it's like for me.

"In 42 B. C. I was living with the Bituriges in Gaul. You remember that Cæsar shut up Werkinghetorich—Vercingetorix to you—in Alesia, and the confederacy raised an army of relief under Caswollon."

"Caswollon?"

The gnarly man laughed shortly. "I meant Wercaswollon. Caswollon was a Briton, wasn't he? I'm always getting those two mixed up.

"Anyhow, I got drafted. That's all you can call it; I didn't want to go. It wasn't exactly *my* war. But they wanted me because I could pull twice as heavy a bow as anybody else.

"When the final attack on Cæsar's ring of fortifications came, they sent me forward with some other archers to provide a covering fire for their infantry. At least, that was the plan. Actually, I never saw such a hopeless muddle in my life. And before I even got within bowshot, I fell into one of the Romans' covered pits. I didn't land on the point of the stake, but I fetched up against the side of it and busted my shoulder. There wasn't any help, because the Gauls were too busy running away from Cæsar's German cavalry to bother about wounded men."

THE AUTHOR of "God, Man, and the Universe" gazed after his departing patient. He spoke to his head assistant: "What do you think of him?"

"I think it's so," said the assistant. "I looked over those X rays pretty closely. That skeleton never belonged to a human being. And it has more healed fractures than you'd think possible."

"Hm-m-m," said Dunbar. "That's right, he wouldn't be human, would he? Hm-m-m. You know, if anything happened to him—"

The assistant grinned understandingly. "Of course, there's the S. P. C. A."

"We needn't worry about *them*. Hm-m-m." He thought, you've been slipping; nothing big in the papers for a year. But if you published a complete anatomical description of a Neanderthal man—or if you found out why his medulla functions the way it does—

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Hm-m-m. Of course, it would have to be managed properly—"

"LET'S have lunch at the Natural History Museum," said McGannon. "Some of the people there ought to know you."

"O. K.," drawled the gnarly man. "Only I've still got to get back to Coney afterward. This is my last day. Tomorrow, Pappas and I are going up to see our lawyer about ending our contract. Guy named Robinette. It's a dirty trick on poor old John, but I warned him at the start that this might happen."

"I suppose we can come up to interview you while you're . . . ah . . . convalescing? Fine. Have you ever been to the museum, by the way?"

"Sure," said the gnarly man. "I get around."

"What did you . . . ah . . . think of their stuff in the Hall of the Age of Man?"

"Pretty good. There's a little mistake in one of those big wall paintings. The second horn on the woolly rhinoceros ought to slant forward more. I thought of writing them a letter. But you know how it is. They'd say: 'Were you there?' and I'd say, 'Uh-huh,' and they'd say, 'Another nut.'"

"How about the pictures and busts of Paleolithic men?"

"Pretty good. But they have some funny ideas. They always show us with skins wrapped around our middles. In summer we didn't wear skins, and in winter we hung them around our shoulders, where they'd do some good.

"And then they show those tall ones that you call Cro-Magnon men clean-shaven. As I remember, they all had whiskers. What would they shave with?"

"I think," said McGannon, "that they leave the beards off the busts to . . . ah . . . show the shape of the chins. With the beards they'd all look too much alike."

"Is that the reason? They might say so on the labels." The gnarly man rubbed his own chin, such as it was. "I wish beards would come back into style. I look much more human with a beard. I got along fine in the sixteenth century when everybody had whiskers.

"That's one of the ways I remember when things happened, by the haircuts and whiskers that people had. I remember when a wagon I was driving in Milan lost a wheel and spilled flour bags from hell to breakfast. That must have been in the sixteenth century, before I went to Ireland, because I remember that most of the men in the crowd that collected had beards. Now—wait a minute—maybe that was the fourteenth. There were a lot of beards then, too."

"Why, why didn't you keep a diary?" asked McGannon with a groan of exasperation.

The gnarly man shrugged characteristically. "And pack around six trunks full of paper every time I moved? No, thanks."

"I . . . ah . . . don't suppose you could give me the real story of Richard III and the princes in the tower?"

"Why should I? I was just a poor blacksmith, or farmer, or something most of the time. I didn't go around with the big shots. I gave up all my ideas of ambition a long time before that. I had to, being so different from other people. As far as I can remember, the only real king I ever got a good look at was Charlemagne, when he made a speech in Paris one day. He was just a big, tall man with Santa Claus whiskers and a squeaky voice."

NEXT MORNING McGannon and the gnarly man had a session with Svedberg at the museum. Then McGannon drove Gaffney around to the lawyer's office, on the third floor of a seedy office building in the West Fifties. James

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Robinette looked something like a movie actor and something like a chipmunk. He looked at his watch and said to McGannon: "This won't take long. If you'd like to stick around, I'd be glad to have lunch with you." The fact was that he was feeling just a trifle queasy about being left with this damn queer client, this circus freak or whatever he was, with his barrel body and his funny slow drawl.

When the business had been completed, and the gnarly man had gone off with his manager to wind up his affairs at Coney, Robinette said: "Whew! I thought he was a half-wit, from his looks. But there was nothing half-witted about the way he went over those clauses. You'd have thought the damn contract was for building a subway system. What *is* he, anyhow?"

McGannon told him what he knew.

The lawyer's eyebrows went up. "Do you *believe* his yarn? Oh, I'll take tomato juice and filet of sole with tartar sauce—only without the tartar sauce—on the lunch, please."

"The same for me. Answering your question, Robinette, I do. So does Saddler. So does Svedberg up at the museum. They're both topnotchers in their respective fields. Saddler and I have interviewed him, and Svedberg's examined him physically. But it's just opinion. Fred Blue still swears it's a hoax or: . . . ah . . . some sort of dementia. Neither of us can prove anything."

"Why not?"

"Well . . . ah . . . how are you going to prove that he was, or was not, alive a hundred years ago? Take one case: Clarence says he ran a sawmill in Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1906 and '07, under the name of Michael Shawn. How are you going to find out whether there was a sawmill operator in Fairbanks at that time? And if you did stumble on a record of a Michael Shawn, how would you know whether he and Clarence were the same? There's not a chance in a thousand that there'd be a photograph or a detailed description that you could check with. And you'd have an awful time trying to find anybody who remembered him at this late date.

"Then, Svedberg poked around Clarence's face, yesterday, and said that no *Homo sapiens* ever had a pair of zygomatic arches like that. But when I told Blue that, he offered to produce photographs of a human skull that did. I know what'll happen. Blue will say that the arches are practically the same, and Svedberg will say that they're obviously different. So there we'll be."

Robinette mused, "He does seem damned intelligent for an ape-man."

"He's not an ape-man, really. The Neanderthal race was a separate branch of the human stock; they were more primitive in some ways and more advanced in others than we are. Clarence may be slow, but he usually grinds out the right answer. I imagine that he was . . . ah . . . brilliant, for one of his kind, to begin with. And he's had the benefit of so much experience. He knows an incredible lot. He knows us; he sees through us and our motives."

The little pink man puckered up his forehead. "I do hope nothing happens to him. He's carrying around a lot of priceless information in that big head of his. Simply priceless. Not much about war and politics; he kept clear of those as a matter of self-preservation. But little things, about how people lived and how they thought thousands of years ago. He gets his periods mixed up sometimes, but he gets them straightened out if you give him time.

"I'll have to get hold of Pell, the linguist. Clarence knows dozens of ancient languages, such as Gothic and Gaulish. I was able to check him on some of them, like vulgar Latin; that was one of the things that convinced me. And there are archeologists and psychologists—

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"If only something doesn't happen to scare him off. We'd never find him. I don't know. Between a man-crazy female scientist and a publicity-mad surgeon—I wonder how it'll work out—"

THE GNARLY MAN innocently entered the waiting room of Dunbar's hospital. He, as usual, spotted the most comfortable chair and settled luxuriously into it.

Dunbar stood before him. His keen eyes gleamed with anticipation behind their pince-nez. "There'll be a wait of about half an hour, Mr. Gaffney," he said. "We're all tied up now, you know. I'll send Mahler in; he'll see that you have anything you want." Dunbar's eyes ran lovingly over the gnarly man's stumpy frame. What fascinating secrets mightn't he discover once he got inside it?

Mahler appeared, a healthy-looking youngster. Was there anything Mr. Gaffney would like? The gnarly man paused as usual to let his massive mental machinery grind. A vagrant impulse moved him to ask to see the instruments that were to be used on him.

Mahler had his orders, but this seemed a harmless enough request. He went and returned with a tray full of gleaming steel. "You see," he said, "these are called scalpels."

Presently the gnarly man asked: "What's this?" He picked up a peculiar-looking instrument.

"Oh, that's the boss's own invention. For getting at the mid-brain."

"Mid-brain? What's that doing here?"

"Why, that's for getting at your— That must be there by mistake—"

Little lines tightened around the queer hazel eyes. "Yeah?" He remembered the look Dunbar had given him, and Dunbar's general reputation. "Say, could I use your phone a minute?"

"Why . . . I suppose . . . what do you want to phone for?"

"I want to call my lawyer. Any objections?"

"No, of course not. But there isn't any phone here."

"What do you call that?" The gnarly man got up and walked toward the instrument in plain sight on a table. But Mahler was there before him, standing in front of it.

"This one doesn't work. It's being fixed."

"Can't I try it?"

"No, not till it's fixed. It doesn't work, I tell you."

The gnarly man studied the young physician for a few seconds. "O. K., then I'll find one that does." He started for the door.

"Hey, you can't go out now!" cried Mahler.

"Can't I? Just watch me!"

"Hey!" It was a full-throated yell. Like magic more men in white coats appeared.

Behind them was the great surgeon. "Be reasonable, Mr. Gaffney," he said. "There's no reason why you should go out now, you know. We'll be ready for you in a little while."

"Any reason why I shouldn't?" The gnarly man's big face swung on his thick neck, and his hazel eyes swiveled. All the exits were blocked. "I'm going."

"Grab him!" said Dunbar.

The white coats moved. The gnarly man got his hands on the back of a chair. The chair whirled, and became a dissolving blur as the men closed on him. Pieces of chair flew about the room, to fall with the dry, sharp *ping* of short lengths of wood. When the gnarly man stopped swinging, having only a short piece of the chair back left in each fist, one assistant was out cold. Another leaned whitely against the wall and nursed a broken arm.

"Go on!" shouted Dunbar when he could make himself heard. The white wave closed over the gnarly man, then broke. The gnarly man was on his feet,

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and held young Mahler by the ankles. He spread his feet and swung the shrieking Mahler like a club, clearing the way to the door. He turned, whirled Mahler around his head like a hammer thrower, and let the now mercifully unconscious body fly. His assailants went down in a yammering tangle.

One was still up. Under Dunbar's urging he sprang after the gnarly man. The latter had gotten his stick out of the umbrella stand in the vestibule. The knobby upper end went *whoosh* past the assistant's nose. The assistant jumped back and fell over one of the casualties. The front door slammed, and there was a deep roar of "Taxi!"

"Come on!" shrieked Dunbar. "Get the ambulance out!"

JAMES ROBINETTE was sitting in his office, thinking the thoughts that lawyers do in moments of relaxation, when there was a pounding of large feet in the corridor, a startled protest from Miss Spevak in the outer office, and the strange client of the day before was at Robinette's desk, breathing hard.

"I'm Gaffney," he growled between gasps. "Remember me? I think they followed me down here. They'll be up any minute. I want your help."

"They? Who's they?" Robinette winced at the impact of that damn perfume.

The gnarly man launched into his misfortunes. He was going well when there were more protests from Miss Spevak, and Dr. Dunbar and four assistants burst into the office.

"He's ours," said Dunbar, his glasses agleam.

"He's an ape-man," said the assistant with the black eye.

"He's a dangerous lunatic," said the assistant with the cut lip.

"We've come to take him away," said the assistant with the torn coat.

The gnarly man spread his feet and gripped his stick like a baseball bat by the small end.

Robinette opened a desk drawer and got out a large pistol. "One move toward him and I'll use this. The use of extreme violence is justified to prevent commission of a felony, to wit: kidnaping."

The five men backed up a little. Dunbar said: "This isn't kidnaping. You can only kidnap a person, you know. He isn't a human being, and I can prove it."

The assistant with the black eye snickered. "If he wants protection, he better see a game warden instead of a lawyer."

"Maybe that's what *you* think," said Robinette. "You aren't a lawyer. According to the law, he's human. Even corporations, idiots, and unborn children are legally persons, and he's a damn sight more human than they are."

"Then he's a dangerous lunatic," said Dunbar.

"Yeah? Where's your commitment order? The only persons who can apply for one are: (a) close relatives and (b) public officials charged with the maintenance of order. You're neither."

Dunbar continued stubbornly: "He ran amuck in my hospital and nearly killed a couple of my men, you know. I guess that gives us some rights."

"Sure," said Robinette. "You can step down to the nearest station and swear out a warrant." He turned to the gnarly man. "Shall we throw the book at 'em, Gaffney?"

"I'm all right," said that individual, his speech returning to its normal slowness. "I just want to make sure these guys don't pester me any more."

"O. K. Now listen, Dunbar. One hostile move out of you and we'll have a warrant out for you for false arrest, assault and battery, attempted kidnaping, criminal conspiracy, and disorderly conduct. *And* we'll slap on a civil suit for damages for sundry torts, to wit: as-

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sult; deprivation of civil rights, placing in jeopardy of life and limb, menace, and a few more I may think of later."

"You'll never made that stick," snarled Dunbar. "We have all the witnesses."

"Yeah? And wouldn't the great Evan Dunbar look sweet defending such actions? Some of the ladies who gush over your books might suspect that maybe you weren't such a damn knight in shining armor. We can make a prize monkey of you, and you know it."

"You're destroying the possibility of a great scientific discovery, you know, Robinette."

"To hell with that. My duty is to protect my client. Now beat it, all of you, before I call a cop." His left hand moved suggestively to the telephone.

Dunbar grasped at a last straw. "Hm-m-m. Have you got a permit for that gun?"

"Damn right. Want to see it?"

Dunbar sighed. "Never mind. You *would* have." His greatest opportunity for fame was slipping out of his fingers. He drooped toward the door.

The gnarly man spoke up. "If you don't mind, Dr. Dunbar, I left my hat at your place. I wish you'd send it to Mr. Robinette here. I have a hard time getting hats to fit me."

Dunbar looked at him silently and left with his cohorts.

THE GNARLY MAN was giving the lawyer further details when the telephone rang. Robinette answered: "Yes. . . . Saddler? Yes, he's here. . . . Your Dr. Dunbar was going to murder him so he could dissect him. . . . O. K." He turned to the gnarly man. "Your friend Dr. Saddler is looking for you. She's on her way up here."

"Zounds!" said Gaffney. "I'm going."

"Don't you want to see her? She was phoning from around the corner. If you go out now you'll run into her. How did she know where to call?"

"I gave her your number. I suppose she called the hospital and my boardinghouse, and tried you as a last resort. This door goes into the hall, doesn't it? Well, when she comes in the regular door I'm going out this one. And I don't want you saying where I've gone. It's nice to have known you, Mr. Robinette."

"Why? What's the matter? You're not going to run out now, are you? Dunbar's harmless, and you've got friends. I'm your friend."

"You're durn tootin' I'm going to run out. There's too much trouble. I've kept alive all these centuries by staying away from trouble. I let down my guard with Dr. Saddler, and went to the surgeon she recommended. First he plots to take me apart to see what makes me tick. If that brain instrument hadn't made me suspicious, I'd have been on my way to the alcohol jars by now. Then there's a fight, and it's just pure luck I didn't kill a couple of those internes, or whatever they are, and get sent up for manslaughter. Now Matilda's after me with a more-than-friendly interest. I know what it means when a woman looks at you that way and calls you 'dear.' I wouldn't mind if she weren't a prominent person of the kind that's always in some sort of garboil. That would mean more trouble, sooner or later. You don't suppose I *like* trouble, do you?"

"But look here, Gaffney, you're getting steamed up over a lot of damn—"

"Ssst!" The gnarly man took his stick and tiptoed over to the private entrance. As Dr. Saddler's clear voice sounded in the outer office, he sneaked out. He was closing the door behind him when the scientist entered the inner office.

Matilda Saddler was a quick thinker. Robinette hardly had time to open his mouth when she flung herself at and through the private door with a cry of "Clarence!"

Robinette heard the clatter of feet on the stairs. Neither the pursued nor the

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pursuer had waited for the creaky elevator. Looking out the window, he saw Gaffney leap into a taxi. Matilda Saddler sprinted after the cab, calling: "Clarence! Come back!" But the traffic was light and the chase correspondingly hopeless.

THEY DID hear from the gnarly man once more. Three months later Robinette got a letter whose envelope contained, to his vast astonishment, ten ten-dollar bills. The single sheet was typed, even to the signature.

DEAR MR. ROBINETTE:

I do not know what your regular fees are, but I hope that the inclosed will cover your services to me of last June.

Since leaving New York I have had several jobs. I pushed a hack—as we say—in Chicago, and I tried out as pitcher on a bush league baseball team. Once I made my living by knocking over rabbits and things with stones, and I can still throw fairly well. Nor am I bad at swinging a club, such as a baseball bat. But my lameness makes me too slow for a baseball career, and it will be some time before I try any remedial operations again.

I now have a job whose nature I cannot disclose because I do not wish to be traced. You need pay no attention to the postmark; I am not living in Kansas City, but had a friend post this letter there.

Ambition would be foolish for one in my peculiar position. I am satisfied with a job that furnishes me with the essentials, and allows me to go to an occasional movie, and a few friends with whom I can drink beer and talk.

I was sorry to leave New York without saying good-by to Dr. Harold McGannon, who treated me very nicely. I wish you would explain to him why I had to leave as I did. You can get in touch with him through Columbia University.

If Dunbar sent you my hat as I requested, please mail it to me: General Delivery, Kansas City, Mo. My friend will pick it up. There is not a hat store in this town where I live that can fit me.

With best wishes, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

SHINING HAWK

alias CLARENCE ALOYSIUS GAFFNEY.

King Solomon the Wise banished the Jinni. But whither? Read "Slaves of Sleep," by L. Ron Hubbard in July Unknown.

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The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

The book-length novels will be continued.

Dear Editor:

Unknown! A surprise magazine of surprise entertainment. Yes, it well fulfills its purpose—to entertain. It could hardly be called a science-fiction, a weird, a fantasy, or a mystery story magazine although it contains something of them all. It's just—Unknown. A dandy and catchy title.

"Sinister Barrier" ranks as one of the best book-lengths I've read. I sat up until three in the morning to finish it. It was my fault for starting it late, but once started I was too fascinated to stop.

Of the short stories you have a nice selection. The one I enjoyed most is "Closed Doors," by A. B. L. Macfadyen, Jr. Next is "Where Angels Fear—" by Manly Wade Wellman.

I like the policy of a book-length novel plus shorts and novelettes varied with two short novels plus the shorter stories. This pleases both those who like book-lengths and those who prefer complete stories.

The cover is good, the subdued blue title appropriate. The inside artwork could be improved. Virgil Finlay would be just the one for this type of magazine. And then there's Wesso, Dold—remember his weird-different illustrations for the old *Miracle, Science and Fantasy Stories?*—and, perhaps someone—unknown.

And so I wish you the best of success in your Unknown venture.—Jack Darrow, 3847 N. Francisco Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Hm-m-m—164 pages counting the back cover.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

You are wrong again—Unknown has one hundred and sixty-two pages, not one hundred and sixty; so bow the editorial head in shame!

Seriously, though, Unknown is all you claimed it would be, and more. And conservative as I am in nominating classics, I unhesitatingly say that "Sinister Barrier" is as good as "The Moon Pool," "The Skylark of Space" and all the other top-notchers. It will undoubtedly rank as one of the year's best.

Next best in the issue—and not very far behind Russell's novel, either—is "Closed Doors." It deserved some ballyhooing it didn't get. "Death Sentence" and "Dark Vision" were excellent. The rest of the stories were satisfactory except "Where Angels Fear—" which was more or less of a flop. If that's your idea of a "psychological horror story," I don't want to see more of them. If you want weird fantasy, pattern it after Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space," or G. A. England's "The Thing from Outside"; they at least have thoughts behind them, and are

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not just lame description. Incidentally, I think "The Thing from Outside" is one of the finest stories of its type ever written.

Unknown's cover was good, but the inside illustrations could stand a little dressing up; they weren't too good.—Langley Searles, 19 East 235th Street, New York, New York.

Hubbard's "Slaves of Sleep" coming next month.

Dear Editor:

Hubbard, after a poor start with his usual central character—getting boresome by now—sweeps to a grand finish in "Ultimate Adventure." Yea, Hubbard! The human quality in the last part of the story, and the good general idea and handling make it a classic.

Burks' "The Changeling," wonderful, except for inability of ending to stand up with rest of story. De Camp's "Divide and Rule," helps prove that that man is my favorite author today.

Shorts were of indifferent nature, but the policy is now well limned.—Dale Tarr, 817 Vine, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Artists and model stories?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

A few comments about the April Unknown.

I'll take up the art work first, because I fear it needs criticism the most. Not the cover, however. It is perfectly swell, which same can be said about the preceding one. But to put the matter mildly, the interiors are rather poor. Only Rogers' for "Divide and Rule!" shows signs of care and attention to detail. The one on Page 148 is very good. However, the one on Page 63 for "You Thought Me Dead"—well, the less said the better. Orban's illustrations are passable, but nothing to brag about.

Maybe I'm unduly harsh about the art work. Maybe the illustrations aren't supposed to be so seriously considered as is the case with a straight science-fiction magazine. But I think they should be. I know that in my case, a good workmanlike drawing helps tremendously in my enjoyment of a story, by helping to put over the mood the story tries to create. And I think that this "artless" condition, as one might put it, can be very easily remedied.

I'm afraid that it's a toss-up between "The Ultimate Adventure," by L. Ron Hubbard and L. Sprague de Camp's "Divide and Rule!" for first honors. Both are very good. Notice, too, that both are written in a humorous vein, which seems to make fantasy more digestible. De Camp is doing a marvelous job with his picturization of a half-modern, half-feudal civilization. Hubbard's story seems to fade a little toward the finish, but it's still a fine piece of work.

"The Changeling," by Arthur J. Burks, takes second. An extremely interesting character study of characters that don't exist! Or don't they? I found myself believing every word of it while reading it, anyhow. Nice going, Burks.

"Death Time," by William G. Bogart, is a very good exposition of a not very new plot. I read something like it some years ago. This is much better done, however.

The other two stories are fair, but that's all.

The short articles are very good, especially the one about the brain. That is a puzzler, all right.

Judging by the first two issues, Unknown will have a long and prosperous career. I hope it continues to present stories as good as Hubbard's and de Camp's, although that will be hard job; I can see that. Incidentally, I like the idea of long feature novel as well as a serial. Long stories always supply more meat to chew on.

Your editorial was very heartening. I just don't like ghost stories.—Robert Jackson, 239 West State Street, Barberton, Ohio.

It sounds unpleasant put this way.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

In Mr. Price's story in the April Unknown, "Strange Gateway," the narrator tells of finding in the murdered man's shack a book on "Yogi Philosophy" by Ramacharaka.

Strictly speaking, Yoga—Sanskrit, meaning literally *union*—is the philosophy, and a Yogi is one who practices it. The thing was started around 500 A. D. by one Kapila; or rather, he started the parent school of Sankhya, from which Yoga branched off. The Yogis added the belief in God, which Sankhya considered either unprovable or inconsistent with the existence of evil in the world. They also added the various methods of self-mortification whereby the practitioner, or victim, achieves something called *samdhi*.

It works something like this: You start by drawing deep breaths, rapidly, for ten or twenty minutes. At the end of that time, your blood is overoxygenated, and you have a fine oxygen-drunk. That is called "spiritual ecstasy." Naturally by this time your automatic breathing-reflexes, as a result of re-

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peated negative stimulation, finally lie down on the job and quit. So, unless you purposely remind yourself to breathe, you just don't, and presently pass out from cyanosis. That is called "merging your soul with the infinite."

About the time you're turning a bright Prussian blue from lack of oxygen—that absorbed during the breathing having been all used up—your breathing-reflexes wake up and start your lungs going again. And presently you come to life once more, feeling quite odd as a result of the abuse to which your respiratory mechanism has been subjected. That is called "being in tune with the Universe."

Another method is to stand on your head. You are provided with an automatic mechanism to compensate for the fact that the hydrostatic pressure of the blood in your head is now greater by ten or twelve feet of blood-plasm than it was when you were upright. But if you stay inverted long enough, this useful little gadget also goes out of commission, or at least gets damned tired. I understand you can get a really charming headache this way, not to mention hallucinations. That is called "breaking the bonds of material existence."

If you keep up your studies long enough and let your hair grow, you may get to the point where you can extract money from suburban housewives by talking about their karmas. You are then a full-fledged Yogi. Personally, I don't think I could make the grade: I'm not limber enough in the joints for the assorted postures.

All we can say is that for those who like this sort of thing, it's the sort of thing they like. Bell in his recent "Man and His Lifebelts"—which I recommend—describes them as people who "believe that all the riddles of existence can be solved by taking a deep breath and holding it till the chairs and tables begin to go round like all the hosts of heaven."—L. Sprague de. Camp, 44 East Sixty-third Street, New York, New York.

"Psychologically sophisticated mythology" sounds about right.

Dear Editor:

I know that I enjoy Unknown, but I don't exactly know why I do. I'm sure it would prove a wise policy if you would only try to "tag" your stories under some distinguishing category. It is difficult to criticize a group of stories if one is at a loss to understand their type. All things have to be some "type." I would classify the tales you present as psychologically sophisticated mythology. Even I am stumped as to what that might mean. A great many of them seem to be rather odd ways of studying the brain phenomena by means of fiction. Especially so was the second issue which resembled a book of modern fairy tales because of the three longest stories. This, of course, does not mean that they weren't good. "The Changeling" by Arthur J. Burks was magnificent, the best in the issue. Not a very complimentary view of the human race, but that is because it is so true. That conference is one I will long remember. We all should. How timely it was, too. A week later, the map of Europe was changed again.

I don't think there was a better humorous story ever written that could excel "Trouble with Water." You said the reader would chuckle. I must admit I never stopped laughing, and that is no misstatement. It will be a very long time before anything as good comes along.

"Death Sentence" was truly remarkable, the best story in the combined issues. If only such a thing were true. "Closed Doors," "Dark Vision" and "Who Wants Power?" 3, 4 and 5 in order of preference in your March number, made up a fine issue, much better than its follower. All had different themes and were interesting to read as well. The only stories in the April issue with this distinctive style were "Death Time" and "Strange Gateway." The serial "Divide and Rule" was very good and humorous, too. But their lack of spunk, their fatalistic viewpoints are very irritating to an American reader. Nothing can happen, nothing will happen, and nothing should happen to spoil the dull routine and oppression set down by the alien hoppers. I'm afraid it is not human nature to take what you get when you don't want it. The monotony would drive me to suicide.

The dénouement of "You Thought Me Dead" was obvious from the beginning. The same is true of "Where Angels Fear—" by Wellman. They were interesting reading though. The two feature novels were good but not as spectacular as you seemed to believe. Illustrations are very poor, covers awful. Gladney is terrible. Best illustrations: "Dark Vision," "The Changeling" and "You Thought Me Dead." Will you please tell me who drew these? The failure on the part of your artists to sign their work is very discouraging. The same goes for the artists in *Astounding*.

If you must use the smooth paper, can't you print the illustrations on the old type. This new kind does havoc with the drawings, they all look gray and washed-out.—Charles Hidley.

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PAROLE

By THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY

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PAROLE

There is a parole no board can grant or take away—and a final release no man controls!

By Thomas Calvert McClary

A BELL clanged along dank stone and steel. Morning slipped hesitantly into the cold, gray prison. Monotony stirred and clung clammily around the rotting souls of men—half dead.

In the third cell from the end on the top tier, two figures stirred. The convict in the lower bunk heaved from his covers and went to the heavily barred window. Gawking wondrously at the mist swirling past the iron that shut them from the world outside, he said: "Gees, ain't it beautiful!"

Soupy Solomon jerked upright in his bunk and blinked unbelievingly as Two Ton moved his ponderous bulk with the dainty tread of a hippo. Two Ton talking about beauty? Hell, the guy was pen-cracked!

He watched Two Ton move to the carefully blocked-out calendar on the wall and begin blocking out the date with extreme care. Surer than the devil, the giant machine gunner had gone screwy! Soupy swung his legs over the side of his bunk and shouted: "Hey, youse hadn't oughta do that until nighttime!"

Two Ton gave him an immensely superior look. "I been figuring," he announced ponderously. "Blocking the date in the morning makes the time pass quicker."

Soupy snorted. "What the hell! With good time off, I still got a hunnert and three years, and you got eleven more!"

Two Ton shook his head with aloof pity. "No espreet de corpse in youse! Think of the Swede. A guy like him hasn't even got a chancet! He's got *straight life!*" Two Ton looked at Soupy to see if he got the vast significance of the difference. He cocked his head to one side dreamily. "What you need is somethin' with class and breedin' waiting outside for youse."

Soupy's brow creased with thought. "You mean a horse?"

Two Ton snorted with disgust. "No, I don't mean no horse! I mean a lady, something you wouldn't be ashamed to go to church wit'!"

"Cripes!" sputtered Soupy. He studied Two Ton closer.

"I mean something you wouldn't even want to give a hot chunk of ice to, unless it was trimmed and safe, see? On account of a lady like this one I'm talking about wouldn't want nothing hot. She's that pure."

Soupy's ears wiggled feverishly. No dame is that pure, he thought.

Two Ton breathed on his fingernails and buffed them on his coarse prison coat. "Like my lady," he said with an attempt at softness, "what's waiting for me!"

Soupy stared suspiciously. He wouldn't want Two Ton thinking no dame, not even a lady dame, was going to wait maybe two hundred years for no mug! "You never told me nothin' about this lady friend before," he announced accusingly.

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"Oh," Two Ton said apologetically, "I wasn't holding out on you, pal! I just met her. Last night."

Soupy took a deep breath of relief. So it was just one of them *pen* dames! Sometimes you met classier skirts in your sleep inside the pen, than you could meet outside if you owned Tiffany's. Like the one Soupy met himself last November.

"Only I can't never get her back all in one piece," he grumbled reminiscently. "Sometimes it's her face missing, then maybe it's her legs. Or she turns into a mob of fat cops, or an empty safe, or something."

"Gilly will come back," Two Ton murmured with certainty. His eyes took on a faraway look. "She told me so. And she's a real lady, see? And real ladies don't kid you none."

GILLY came back just as she had promised. In the grim quiet of the prison nights she used to take Two Ton to ritzy shows and big-time fights and sometimes even a political beefsteak. She came almost every night. There was never any part of Gilly missing! Because Gilly was a lady and wouldn't pull no fade-out, Two Ton explained to Soupy. And Soupy agreed, in sorrow that he had never known a real lady.

A new Two Ton emerged out of the hardened old trigger man. He began cleaning his teeth extra hard every day. He grumbled that the prison only let them take baths once a week. He began paying real attention to the Sunday church service, and he went in for reading the history of the arts! His pal watched him with envy and wonder.

"We got tickets for the World's Series," Two Ton said in late summer. "I wanna get her something real swell, you know something elegant, that'll make her look like a million when she's sitting in that box just behind the home plate." He stopped to pick a tooth and suddenly drew his finger away from his mouth in recollection of what was manners. "I got her a box," he added as an afterthought, "on account of I don't like her mixing with all the rabble and hoi polloi."

Soupy tossed aside a magazine of lurid semi-nude knockouts as beneath the sanctity of the discussion. He didn't even want them kind of girls' pictures around when they talked of Gilly. And Two Ton's life with her had taken on a permanent seriousness.

"Say!" Soupy shot with sudden suspicion. "You two been hittin' the high spots pretty regular lately. Where you gettin' the coin?"

Two Ton glared indignantly. "I'm a big-shot coal dealer!" he explained aloofly.

"Oh, that's O. K.," Soupy nodded. "I was afraid maybe you'd gone back in the racket!"

Gray weeks rolled into another summer. There was no kidding about Gilly. You didn't kid none about real ladies.

"She's going to take me yacht-ting," Two Ton confided while shining his heavy prison boots.

"Gees!" said Soupy with interest. "Right on a big boat with all them swells! I always wanted to go on a big boat. That's why I enlisted in the war."

"You was blown in by the draft," Two Ton corrected.

"All right! Anyway, the nearest I come to a boat was rowing the adjutant across a creek once. When you going?"

"Tonight, maybe," Two Ton said.

It was a very big boat Two Ton took Gilly aboard that night. In fact, it was the Queen Mary as it had appeared in prison newsreels. But it pitched violently when a storm came up.

Two Ton thought about heroically saving Gilly. But he got seasick instead. He was awakened by Soupy shaking him. "You must have et something," Soupy said.

"Pheasant," Two Ton gulped. "Gilly

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told me not to take that thoid helping. *Third helping,*" he corrected himself.

He paid even more attention to bettering himself after that.

SLUG MACKEN was the first punk to get wise to Two Ton's bent toward culture. Slug worked on the big belt in the shoe shop next to Soupy.

"A punch-drunk lug like him don't go shining his shoes and scrubbing his neck just on account of he's dumb," Macken leered. "He's pen-cracked. He thinks he's got a broad somewhere! And your little Oscar is going to have some fun about it."

That meant Two Ton would have to take Slug to pieces and probably lose the good time he was working so hard for. Worse, he'd get in dutch with Gilly! She didn't want him mixing with a bunch of mugs and acting like a hoodlum.

Soupy's eyes grew hard. Men cherish small illusions when in prison. "Yeah?" he asked from the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah!" answered Slug with an edge to his voice. His hand crept toward a wrench.

"You don't mean that," Soupy said.

Soupy moved swiftly. There was a shriek of pain, and the big belt of the shoe binder quivered with sudden strain. The shriek died in mid-note. The belt began to skid, slipped, jerked a dozen times, and hissed to a stop.

A shoe-binding machine can stitch a man's body just as it would a shoe. The prison croaker spent the next eight weeks wondering whether Slug Macken would survive to look like a monstrous mass of seamed meat, or be buried looking almost like a badly seamed shoe.

Soupy spent sixteen weeks in the damp and airless black hole on bread and water. When they carried him back to his cell, the dim light felt like hot lead in his eyes. His stomach lay flat against his back, and his tongue was twisted like a corkscrew.

"You want to hurry and get fixed up," Two Ton welcomed. "Gilly's met

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up with an old girl friend, pal, and we're all going stepping."

Soupy gave a cackling chuckle, then fell morose. Hell, what good was it going to do him? All he'd dream about would be that slimy ward boss; or maybe a safe fading in where Gilly's girl friend ought to be; or maybe he'd think about how Slug Macken looked as the stitcher swallowed his arm and began stitching his head.

But he never mentioned the swift changes of his dreams to Two Ton. If Gilly was real to Two Ton, she was real to him!

GRAY had frosted the hair around Two Ton's temples. Yet the ravages of time in the soul-crushing walls of stone had not marked Two Ton's face, nor stooped his shoulders, as it had other men. His step was buoyant, his motions quick, his eyes alert.

Carefully, Two Ton marked a heavy circle around a calendar date. "Eighteen years, Soupy! I'd be pen-cracked if it wasn't for Gilly."

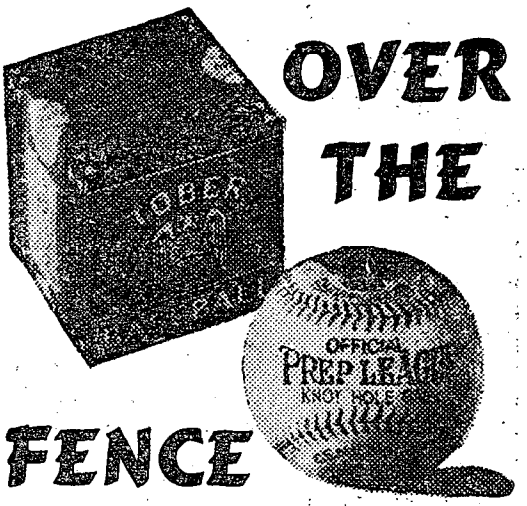
—"Yeah, you'd be screwy as a bedbug," Soupy agreed.

Two Ton sighed. He looked up at his pal with embarrassment and childish wonder. "We're gonna be hitched, pal!" he confided. "Church and all. June 16th."

"Married," Soupy repeated in a husky whisper. Tears gathered in his aging eyes. "A house and kids. Gees—"

Soupy had money with the warden. He sent for a wedding ring for Two Ton the day the warden sent for Soupy's pal. He got special permission to send out for a cake and some small dainties, because of his long sentence and his recent excellent behavior.

Two Ton was sitting in the cell looking puzzled and afraid when Soupy came in from work. Every once in a while he would walk to the barred window and gaze out. The great muscles of his back would bulge beneath his prison coat.



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"Some rat ain't started trouble?" Soupy blurted.

Two Ton laughed harshly. "They're gonna parole me, Soupy!"

"Cripes, what do you want?"

Heavy window bars bent under Two Ton's grasp. His shoulders heaved. His voice welled up from his very soul. "I never asked 'em for it! But they're gonna do it! Kick me out—June 15th!"

"Hell!" Soupy muttered in bewilderment. Suddenly he remembered. June 15th would be the day before Two Ton's wedding!

Two Ton's voice rushed on: "I never knew a real lady like her before! Like this, it was all right. I was in business and doing O. K. and maybe we'd have had a house and kids." His arm shot out in a crushing blow against the world outside the grim gray walls. "Out there it would be different. I wouldn't be no big-shot coal dealer out there. Maybe I couldn't even find her again!"

His great shoulders shook as he cursed the fates that were giving him his freedom. That night he went down with prison fever.

A WEEK later the turnkey wakened Soupy. "The chief croaker says to bring you. Your pal's about finished his stretch, Soupy." Their footsteps down the long cold corridors echoed like the steps of approaching death.

Two Ton lay grayer than the bleak dawn shadows. There had been a fever spot on his cheeks, but even that was now gray, like cooling embers. He opened frightened, weary eyes.

Soupy leaned over. "It's June 15th, pal! The sun ain't up yet," he whispered.

Two Ton's great body quivered once. "I can't last it, Soupy!"

Soupy swallowed and bent lower over the dying giant. "I got Gilly here," he murmured huskily. "And I brung the wedding ring. She wants to get married right now, see?"

He slipped a man's wedding ring off his own hand and over Two Ton's finger. He raised the heavy arm so that the spent giant could see. A chuckle of happiness came from Two Ton's throat. His eyes fired with gladness.

His chuckle turned to a more sullen sound, and the fire went out like a sunset dying into a black typhoon.

The croaker pulled down Two Ton's lids and crossed his arms across his chest. The chaplain said the prayer. They walked into the outer ward.

"He would have been paroled today," the croaker noted.

"Never noticed his ring before," the chaplain said. "I didn't think this wife he was talking about was a real woman."

Soupy blew his nose and spit forlornly. "She was real enough. Real enough for him to die for!"

Dawn glared white and brash over the gray parapets. Far in the distance a hawk hurtled skyward to its shaftless pinnacle. The sun, not yet over the horizon, glinted off its wings. For a second the hawk hovered and called down its strident cry of freedom.

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THE HEXER

By H. W. GUERNSEY

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THE HEXER

He had a highly developed sense of humor, which might have been all right. But his highly developed magic—!

By H. W. Guernsey

Oxboro *Enquirer*, June 2. —at the departmental hearing on the Kramer case, Patrolman Brian Daugherty insisted stubbornly on his original version of the odd affair. Off duty and in plain clothes, he was walking home. He was nearing the deserted intersection of Dale Avenue and Fourth Street shortly after ten o'clock last Monday evening when a man "come helling around the corner." Asked what he meant by "helling," Daugherty explained, "Like mad, like a banshee. He was traveling like a bat out of— I mean he was really traveling."

Commissioner Hopkins asked: "Are you familiar with banshees, Daugherty?"

Without cracking a smile, Daugherty said: "My old lady told me about a couple of them she saw in Ireland, but I never saw one myself."

Mayor Anderson said impatiently: "Let's get ahead."

Daugherty recited, "Another man busts around the corner almost as fast as the first one who I was shagging."

"Got eyes in the back of your head?"

"I heard him. The first guy was running light; the second guy was running heavy."

"The second guy. That would be Heinrich Kramer?"

"Yessir; only I didn't know who he was then, though. He come boiling around the corner hanging onto his head. Like this." Daugherty demonstrated, grabbing his head like a basketball and making a face. "He looked nuts, with his eyes glaring that way. I had my gun out, and when he saw it he stopped. I asked him what was his hurry, and he said his head. 'My head,' he says, just like that. The guy he was chasing was gone already, so I went for Kramer, just walking easy toward him. Right away he ducked back around the corner, and when I got there, he was halfway down the block already and picking up speed all the time."

Jan Kupra, representing the *Enquirer*, asked: "Aren't you pretty handy with your gun, Daugherty?"

"I'm a good shot," Daugherty admitted modestly. "I got him when he was over a block away."

"You just took aim and shot him. If you'd killed him, it would have been murder."

Daugherty got red in the face, and said: "He'll tell you so himself. First I yelled him to halt and he—"

"You yelled him to halt?" Kupra mimicked.

"Get along with this," the mayor ordered.

"I yelled him to halt, and he kept on going. Then I fired over his head, and he still kept on going, so I brung the aim down a little bit."

"And you got him," said Kupra. "And he skinned his nose and his knees, and might have cracked his skull and died, and it would still be murder. Do you like to shoot men in the back, Daugherty?"

"Shut up!" Mayor Anderson shouted, "or I'll throw you right out of here myself!"

"I was shooting for his legs," Daugherty said, "but the way he was running, I had to aim higher. He ain't hurt much, except he ain't comfortable sitting down. What the hell, I thought he was trying to hold up that other guy, and I had to stop him.

"When I got to him, chief, he was cussing around like I'd have to throw him in the klink if there was anybody listening to him but me. He was calling me names that—"

"Never mind. Mr. Kramer is noted for his vocabulary outside of Oxboro."

"Yessir." Then he started talking wild about his head again. He said that guy

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he was chasing done something to his head. I asked him what, and he clammed up. I took him to the hospital on account of that little puncture, and that's all, sir."

Heinrich Kramer, of course, is the bard of Oxboro. He is as well known for his several great novels as for his own almighty opinion of them, classing himself with Hardy, Maugham and others. He has long been considered the leader of Oxboro's café society. It was ascertained by police that on Monday evening Kramer the Great was drinking in the exclusive Number 400 and holding forth to companions, when he was annoyed by a stranger staring at him and chuckling. Kramer made a comment to his friends about the stranger, abruptly clapped his hands to his head and knocked over a table on his way to reach the man who was staring at him. The man got up hurriedly and left, with Kramer in chase.

Mr. Kramer has confined himself to his home, refusing to be interviewed, refusing in fact to bring charges against Patrolman Daugherty.

"There's no sense in it; it's whacky," Kupra said. "What's all this business about his head? There was nothing wrong with his head except for its size. You can't go around shooting prominent citizens indiscriminately, Daugherty."

Mayor Anderson said: "I warned you, Kupra; you're only here to listen. Now GET OUT!"

The mayor screamed the way he does whenever he gets the chance, and everybody in Oxboro knows how he gets grapefruit-purple in the face and sticks his hammy ears out, and hikes his shoulders up so that it looks as though he hasn't got any neck.

The mayor then told Daugherty, "You, too, patrolman. Get out, and take your banshees along with you. Get back to your post, and next time don't be too handy with your gun."

Why the famous Heinrich Kramer acted as he did, is a mystery. But he chose to run when arrested, and he didn't stop when Daugherty fired a warning shot.

The only description of the man whom Kramer was chasing is that he was slight, elderly but athletic, and well-dressed in a dark suit; black topcoat; hat and shoes. As yet no clue to this individual's identity has been found—

A few days later in his column, *The Banana Stem,* Jan Kupra wrote:

> There is something funny going on in Oxboro. The secret won't last long, because the mortality among secrets shaves one hundred percent pretty close. For the time being, certain people are acting with suspicious furtiveness; they jump up and beat it out of restaurants while you're talking to them, snub old friends on the street, and some of them stick inside their houses as though there's a plague on the loose. Maybe it's a secret society, and maybe it's political, huh? If you don't think strange habits and unnatural actions and secret plots are dangerous, remember what happened to Heinrich Kramer. According to the way they're behaving, we could name a few names who belong in the bughouse down the river. Names you've seen in print before, too—

THE streetcars in Oxboro are way longer and wider and more powerful than the trolleys in New York. They are painted bright canary-yellow, and the seating accommodations consist of lengthwise seats in front and rear, crosswise seats in the middle. In the crosswise seats passengers look at the backs of heads and study dandruff, coiffures, and types of ears. In the lengthwise seats passengers sneak looks at pretty legs, succumb to the hypnotic interest of blemishes and deformities, and shorten the ride with successive mental sneers at all those hopeless, idiotic specimens of humanity lined up across the aisle.

Kupra owned an expensive sedan which he used for pleasure; he took the streetcar to the shop and elsewhere during the day, because it looked democratic; besides, being a born snoop, he never tired of studying faces, strange or familiar. He liked to analyze, to sift all the fascinating details which make up a countenance, to take a face apart and put it back together again like God. An old hand at the game, he was able to say, "That man has the eyes of a murderer"; or "Well-dressed as he is, the man's ears are more animal than human." On the 7th of June, Kupra

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was riding in the rear section of a street-car on the Hill Park line, and practicing industriously his refined, private brand of cannibalism.

The sky was all blue, and the sun was shining particularly on Oxboro. Some of the green lawns and boulevards were splashed with dandelions in beds, like microspores of pollen each expanded to giant size. Having finished his covert inspection of Passengers Number 1 and 2, Kupra went to work with his eyes and mind on the third individual from the left. Kupra read from left to right.

This person was an old man of perhaps seventy winters. Whatever his stature was in its prime, he had diminished to gnomelike proportions. Height: five-feet-four; weight: a hundred to a hundred and ten pounds; white hair, fashionably barbered. He was a neat person, and sat with his knees close together, his spine straight, his slim, girlish hands folded asleep composedly in his lap. His necktie was correct with his shirt, whose collar encircled his slender throat with accurate, soft dimensions. He wore a dark-gray hat, a suit of hard gray worsted that was immaculately pressed and tailored, sheer socks that were snug around his ankles, shapely shoes which were narrow and short and pointed, painstakingly carved out of solid ebony and polished with oil. His lips were compressed to a thin line, and he was so smoothly shaven that his face was a girlishly fresh cameo. His ears were Puckish, close to his head. Kupra observed the observant stillness of the stranger's eyes, and afterward he could never remember what color they were. All told, the dear little old man who was riding on the seat across the aisle was a diminutive aristocrat whose lips smiled subtly about something.

Kupra looked along his nose with great dubiety, then slowly raised his face to the varnished, hooded architecture of the ceiling, just to make sure; his nose was a yard long, or longer. He sighted long it, after the manner of a hunter centering on a deer with a .351 rifle.

None of the other passengers observed the casual lifting of his eyebrows.

Kupra brought his attention down again and the attenuated schnozzle wabbled elastically. When he turned his head too suddenly, his newly acquired deformity wagged obscenely, like the tail of a hairless dog. He lifted his hand to his face with a careless gesture, and made sure that the long, nude proboscis was there. It was there, all right, equal in length to four or five frankfurters joined end to end, about a pound in weight since it was boneless. It was his own secret, obviously invisible to all the other passengers. Save perhaps one. He stared hard at the beautifully tailored old pixie across the aisle.

He was shaking with some private mirth. When Kupra's eyes returned to him, he rang the bell abruptly and reached the back platform as the car arrived at an intersection. The back gates opened and he got off, and was gone at a brisk, catfooting walk after a glance through the windows at the stricken Kupra.

THE BROOMSTICK of nose was the old man's doing. It was he who had escaped from Heinrich Kramer, chasing him because he had made the Oxboro bard's big head a private actuality. And now he had hexed Kupra, hanging a pole of snout on his face, giving the keyhole-peeper a branch of anatomy which he could really snoop with.

Appalled by the indecency of the fate that had overtaken him, Kupra turned his head to look out the window at the green lawns riding by and sort of get rid of the whole idea. There was a man sitting beside him, and the gun barrel of nose batted him across the Adam's apple.

"Glob!" exclaimed the man, and took

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hold of his throat. He glared suspiciously at the columnist, who sat with hands folded, staring innocently across the way. Frowning with puzzlement and worry, the man kept swallowing experimentally and gently massaging his gozzle.

As for Kupra, he refrained from stroking the pain out of the marvelous beak where its architecture had bent across his fellow-passenger's neck.

For the duration of the ride he kept the phantom schnozzle gently clamped between his knees, anchoring it out of harm's way and pondering the immaculately dressed old Hexer's malicious talent.

He got off at Ashland, his street. Big elms were spaced along the boulevard, and the warm shadow under their canopy of foliage was conducive to thought and experimentation. With no citizens in sight, he explored the ghostly sniffer from end to end as though playing a dirge on a flute, and there was not the least doubt about its authenticity. It was a hell of a quandary to be in.

A housewife interrupted the chore of sweeping off her porch to watch the rapt, sleepwalking exercises which Kupra was doing with his arms.

"Hello, Mr. Kupra," she called, in the tone of a person addressing a drunk. "Is something the matter?"

"Just exercising, Mrs. Jefferson," he lied resignedly. "You know how your arms get stiff."

He continued on his way with his hands in his pockets, shaking his head slowly with dull disbelief. His nose wagged; it had the same flexibility as its length in garden hose. He was the proprietor of a phenomenon which would baffle surgery. No wonder Kramer had run from Daugherty; if he had divulged what the Hexer had done to his head, the authorities might have consigned him to the nuthouse down the river. On Kupra it was a terrible punishment to visit for his crimes of reporting. With a stroke of his eye the old man had done it, the mischievous devil.

When he reached his number, he observed two cars parked at the curb, empty. He had guests as usual. He had loaned his keys a couple of times, and the girls had had duplicates made; he hadn't got around to having the locks changed; the girls were sources of information as to who was having babies, when, what guy or gal was breaking up whose home, and so on.

THERE WERE five people sitting in his living room, drinking Collinses made out of his fancy gin. Morosely he looked around at Johnny Pollet, Jeannette Shires, Dave Martinson, Anne Pryor and Betty Turner.

"Want a drink?" Anne asked.

"Yeah, will you mix me one?" he asked. "I'll be taking a shower; I'm all sticky."

Perspiring and shaken because of what the Hexer had done to him, he closed his bedroom door, stripped and stepped under the shower for a quick one. He forgot about the nose until the last, soaped it then and wagged it under the spray to rinse it. The magnitude of the unmerciful disaster which had overtaken him numbed his wits; he moved like an automaton, stepping out of the tub and toweling himself. He made a complete change of clothing even to shoes. As he selected a new shirt from a bureau drawer and got into it, he hung a new necktie temporarily on his bugaboo of nose, about midway along. In the mirror, the necktie looked as though it were suspended in midair. In spite of its stick-out reality, the nose didn't reflect.

He closed the drawer, fortunately not hard because his nose got caught in the crack. He clawed the drawer open. Pain streamed up the schnozzle into his skull and nearly blew off the top of his head. Shuddering, he screwed his eyes

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up; tears trickled, tickling, down his olfactory extension.

Dabbing at his eyes, he gained control of himself and joined the chattering party in the living room. A drink had been made for him.

When Anne tendered the glass she performed in a most peculiar manner. Instead of turning around and going back to her chair in a normal way, she backed warily with a very odd smile, passing a hand behind her and making a gesture as though catching something up. Kupra, who had held his head aside with an absent-minded expression to keep his nose out of the way, stared speculatively at her while she smoothed her dress with singular extravagance and drew her legs up onto a window seat. Anne was a brunette, choicely rounded and graceful; she had the right height and heft and resiliency of anatomy, and cultivated a pronounced ability to pose. She was feline in her exact graduations of movement, and her voluptuousness was contained this afternoon in a handkerchief-linen dress opaqued with a satin slip. The wrinkling across the hips and in the skirt behind did not diminish her attractiveness, and she didn't need to worry about showing an amount of knee and a moongleam of thigh, because she was among friends.

Wondering why she acted as though she thought he would give her a kick if she turned her back on him, Kupra went to a chair and sat on its arm, keeping the lengthy quiver of his nose away from his drink so that he wouldn't knock it out of his hand himself.

"Well, what's the important word?" he asked at large.

Around the room he got serial answers, "Nothing happens," "Mh-mh. Hm-m-m," "I don't know a thing," "What have *you* got?" and "There's nobody in town but us."

"Oh, you just dropped in," Kupra commented. He tried his drink, and it was pretty good for a girl's work. No taste of gin. He arrived at the conclusion that there was no gin in the drink, and repaired to the kitchen, returning to hear a lot of conversation about nothing going on. Anne was highly decorative and posey, and was strolling about for effect as usual. Kupra observed that now and then she gave her hips an inexplicable galvanic twist as though she were muscling an appendage, like a cat. A cat she was, of course, and eventually someone stepped on her tail. She let out an agonized caterwaul, grabbed behind her and snatched to her breast the injured member, which, of course, was just as invisible as Kupra's nose.

Everyone jumped, and Kupra asked: "What was that for?"

"Why, nothing," she said breathlessly. She forced a laugh. "I just wanted to see you all jump."

"A fine sense of humor you've got," Kupra remarked. "Don't do that again; it's too hot to jump."

HE LET the party go on as it would, just listening. Being host was never any exertion to him, because if anyone wanted a drink the person made it himself. He kept an eye on Anne, remembering the torment in the screech she had let out. When he had a chance he told her: "I want to talk to you."

She agreed, and they drifted unobserved into the bedroom of the bungalow. When he had closed the door he asked: "What's on your mind, Anne? Come on, what's the matter?"

"I don't know what you mean. Honestly, I haven't got anything for you. Please." She was out of breath.

He stared at her, and there was fright in her eyes. "Maybe nothing I can print," he suggested, "but something else?"

"Always the snoop," she bantered, "It might be something very personal, none of your business at all, you know."

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"I can almost guess what it is," he hinted.

"You couldn't possibly."

"Listen, Anne," he urged. "Haven't I always been a mommie and poppie to you? Have I ever done you dirty? Gimme."

"All right; it's just this. Well," she groped, "I . . . I think I'm going crazy. Really bughouse, I mean."

"What makes you think you're going bughouse?"

"I've got a tail," she said shakily.

"What kind of a tail?"

"A cat's tail. I mean I really have," she said in a rush of words. "It was trailing on the rug, and Dave Martinson sank his heel into it."

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun," Kupra mused. Anne looked as though she were going to cry. He saw her wet eyes and said hastily: "Don't worry, Anne; you're no battier than I am. Just a minute, though. If you've got a tail, how do you get a dress on over it?"

"I don't know," she said, with a shrug of despair. "It just works that way."

"Line of cleavage," he muttered.

She turned, and he made a pass at the supposedly empty air. She said: "There. Oh, damn it!"

Rooted to the base of her spine was indubitably the tail of a cat, its proportions proper for her size. It was covered with fur, and flexible, and she could twitch it, having full muscular control over it. He let it slip through his fingers to the end, ascertaining that it was a generous five feet long. Experimentally he tugged, and she was compelled to back up protestingly.

"It's there beyond a doubt," he said. "Now guess what I've got. A nose." He had her stand just so, and gave her a gentle bat across the side of the head.

With awe, after feeling along its

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length, Anne said: "For heaven's sake." She laughed uncertainly.

"I guess," he said sardonically, "that he wanted to bring home the idea that I was sticking my nose into other people's business, like the feline streak in your case."

"I'm not feline."

"You've given me some pretty catty gossip."

"But how can such a thing happen? It's utterly wild!"

"Very utterly. When did this tail grow on you?"

"Just a couple of days ago. I was having cocktails with a couple of the girls down at the Casino, and we were chatting—"

"Cutting each other's throats, and snickering at your friends, maybe telling a nasty story about some Hollywood actress because you're not in Hollywood."

"Gee, you've got a mean tongue," she said. "Anyhow, all at once it happened. Umph. As quick as that. I left right away, of course, as soon as I was sure. I'm positive the girls didn't suspect anything, because they had engagements and were in a hurry, too."

"I wonder what he did to them."

"What did who do?"

"Hoodoo is right," Kupra cracked. "Did you happen to notice a pink-faced shrimp of an old man anywhere in the Casino? A skinny old geezer all barbered and manicured and tailored up."

"Oh! He was all alone at the next table, and he bought all our drinks for us. He looked charming, but I wondered if he wasn't senile and thinking he was going to get something out of it."

"Rest your mind. That old monkey is the one responsible for this. He got me on the streetcar only a little while ago on the way uptown."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Why, that devilish little mummy!"

"Sure. He gave Henny Kramer a head the size of a beer barrel; Kramer

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was quick on the trigger and chased the buzzard who hexed him up like that. Damn that cop Daugherty. Henny was just about grabbing the old guy's coat tails."

"Kramer was a fool to run."

"Sure he was. But are you going to go around advertising the fur job he did on you?"

"You won't tell on me, will you?" she begged. "It's so devastatingly ridiculous."

"As long as you don't give me away about my nozzle."

They regarded each other strickenly, and with the baffled compassion of companions in misery.

"I wonder if the condition is permanent," she hazarded. There was a wail in her inflection. "People are beginning to think I'm queer. I have to positively sprint into a room so that I don't get a door closed on my tail. And I get tired of keeping it curled in the air all the time so that it doesn't get stepped on. Besides, it's nervous; it's got a tic in it that's driving me out of my mind. And it gets matted the way fur does and feels terrifically uncomfortable. I'm combing it all the time. And even with an electric drier, after I give it a bath, it's ages before it's all fluffy again."

"I just closed a drawer on my beak when I changed my shirt," Kupra chimed in somberly. "When I go to bed tonight I guess I'll have to lie on my back and do a juggling act. And I never was able to sleep on my back."

"You know," said Anne, "I think there's something wrong with Jeannette and Betty, too. They've been acting as though they've eaten a goblin apiece."

"There's something screwy about Martinson, too."

AFTER kissing Anne, just to see whether it could be done with the handicap of his nasal equipment, Kupra eased open the latch of the bedroom door and looked through the crack. They rejoined the party which had formed through the usual happenstance. People who had nothing important to do in hot weather, collecting in comfortable surroundings in which someone had snitched a key—Betty or Anne or both.

The drinking went on through the afternoon past twilight. Kupra found things out. Across the room, Dave Martinson was getting himself soused. He was a lawyer, somber in appearance, dark and devious in the ways of his mind. His forehead was smooth, white, as unblemished as a boy's. Absently, he was tracing with a forefinger an invisible mark, a certain letter which the Hexer had branded there above his eyes. The habit of tracing the letter revealed it in pinkish outline. Martinson caught Kupra staring, and the lanky lawyer jerked his hat on, sat staring morosely at the rug, inevitably to raise his finger to his forehead again.

Jeannette Shires spent a couple of hours a day on her marvelous complexion; she had gardenia-petal skin, its purity accented by magnificent black hair in a carved coiffure of gleaming curls. During the evening she got Kupra aside and asked to borrow his razor. She had a whim to shave her legs, she said. Kupra told her they didn't look as though they needed it.

"What do you know about it?" she retorted.

"The more you shave your legs, the hairier they'll get," he warned.

"That's all right with me," she retorted. "All I've got to do is keep them shaved."

The Hexer had got her. He had given her a heavy black beard, and she had to shave twice a day.

That made it five out of six. If this group was representative of the town, the Hexer had already distributed his wares among five-sixths of the citizens of Oxboro.

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KEEPING his eyes skinned for the next few days, Kupra found plenty of evidence that such was the case, that the Hexer had spared very few in squeegeeing the town. Some of the deeds were good; most appeared to have been committed with the most greedy malice.

There was a certain loud-mouthed cop, notorious for his insolence of manner in writing out tickets, who had mule's ears. From the length of the stroke, for he was continually feeling them to see if they were still there, it could be determined that they were a full eighteen inches of botheration. A certain blind beggar, who had salted away something like sixty thousand dollars at his profession, really went blind and got run down by a truck. That was how the money turned up.

The best-dressed man in town started growing flowers back of his ears. The narcissus scent was unmistakable. A listener could detect the snap of stems when he picked them daily. He got round-shouldered and ceased wearing a gardenia in his lapel.

The meanest man in town had a face like a saint. Overnight a caprice of paralysis struck his benign countenance into an iron mask of virulent detestation of the whole human race.

And so on down the line.

Mostly, the Hexer avoided repetition in his works, indicating interest in his profession, or hobby. Not everyone was affected by the potent gleam of that gray eye, but his goal was not necessarily a hundred percent. Too, it was presumable that only he could take back his gifts; widely as he plied his mischief, however, none of his victims saw him more than once; he returned no more, deaf in his mad glee to prayers in whatever humility or rage pronounced. What he did he would not undo.

All Kupra found to do was hope futilely that his particular curse would wear off; while the phantom schnozzle might yield to surgery, he had the dark conviction that another one would spontaneously sprout. At the typewriter, when he knocked off his daily column for the *Enquirer*, he kept on printing capital letters, quotation marks and the like on his beak. Sometimes he wondered whether mass insanity had hit town. Otherwise he wondered where the little old man had come from, and where the little old man had gone.

He certainly did his cussedest in Oxboro.

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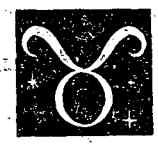

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Continued from page 66

had succeeded—but the waters he had released might put an end to his successes. For one day, he was to rule. And perhaps that day had passed while he slept, while in the streets the people still chanted: "Thou art the man."

No use to count now. He had lost all sense of distance, but his fingers still groped along the wall. Another knob. Was this the right one? He would have no further chance, he knew. The water was above his knees, and the hollow rush of it sent wind to whine in his ears. By Ahriman, not even Father Tiber in flood could run so swiftly. He must chance it. He reached upward into the dark, and lifted his weight. Another knob, another— He had found the way to the warehouse. The stench of the furs came down thinly to his nostrils, sucked down by the rushing waters. Wan Tengri hummed softly as he scrambled up the remaining distance and began to fumble rapidly into his clothes. He had lost a good lariat and an excellent sword-belt, but he had his life and, if the gods favored, if Christos favored—he would have the city by dawn!

He darted across the warehouse cellar and threw his shoulder against the trap-door, staggered up to the ground-level floor. There was no flicker from the flame dance coming in through the arrow slit. That could mean only one thing. His mine would not yet have drained off the flaming moat. Bourtai had loosed his black fog! Three long, stumbling strides took him to the door, and his impatience made short work of the barrier. He leaped out into the cleanness of the night air, was blinded instantly by the dark, surging fog that crowded close to earth. It had a pungent odor like burning spices, and Wan Tengri smiled briefly at this magic of Bourtai as he turned his long strides toward the furious shouting that beat up to heaven; toward the crystal ball and the fountain.

A thrust shoved his sword through slits in the white coat of the khan, and a few quick movements strung his bow. He paused, and three times his bowstring sang, three times arrows whisked off into the darkness, traveling at the height of a man's heart. There were fresh crescendoes of sound, and shrill, soaring screams echoed the twang of his bowstring. Moving slowly forward, taking his bearings from the building he had left, Wan Tengri sent his arrows searching before him. If the multi-colored guard were not already fighting, he thought they soon would be. He made a half turn to the left and sped three arrows that way, did the same to the right. Now, he could hear the welcome clangor of steel and men's battle shouts of rage. Deftly, he swung his bow upon his back and took his keen sword in his hand. Ah, if he had had this beauty in the arena, the battles would not have lasted so long! He swung it singing through the air, and stepped out confidently.

A shadow loomed out of the dusk, and the sword of Prester John struck without hesitation. A man fell, groveling, to the earth, and when Wan Tengri stepped over him, he saw the faint glim-

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mer of a golden tunic. There were other bodies in his path, showing dimly through the fog. Two bore the tuft of Wan Tengri's arrows, but there were many others with their throats cut. Probably, they had struck each other down the instant the fog fell. Wan Tengri began to run, lightly, with long-striding legs. Through the diminishing fury of the battle, he could catch faintly the tinkle of the perfumed fountain. He came on it suddenly, his feet tripping over its verge, and strained his eyes to see—to see that the crystal ball no longer bobbled in the jet!

A fearful shout of anger strained Wan Tengri's throat. Now he knew for certainty that he had not miscalculated his time. Bourtai had dared to deceive him, to work this sly treachery. Bourtai had possession of the key to mastery of the city and its treasures! He had carried off the crystal ball!

VIII.

WAN TENGRI strained his eyes through the thinning fog, through the smarting in his eyeballs, and peered toward the Flame Tower. He could make out the white loom of it faintly, and the flames in the moat were dying, thanks to his magic. That was where he would find the wolfish Bourtai. Wan Tengri's lips twisted in a grim smile, and he lifted his hand for the sandals he had swung about his neck while his long stride carried him toward the tower.

He groped for the sandals and abruptly, softly he laughed. "Aye, this Bourtai is a clever scoundrel! He has called back his soul. Now, surely a man may do that. If he can place it where he will, surely he may call his soul his own?"

And now Wan Tengri had no weapon over Bourtai save his own magic and the things he had learned in the waging of those three battles. He had a shrewd suspicion that the things Death had told him—if, indeed, Death had spoken at all—were only a small part of what he needed to know; he thought he had learned how a man who had survived the three battles might rule Turgohl.

Dimly, he could glimpse a small clustering of figures against the last red glow of the dying flames. He saw the crystal ball held on high by a twisted small figure that, now and again, stared furtively into the fading dark fog. And Bourtai's thin, cracking voice lifted, plaintively:

"I bring you, princess, the gift of the ball. Open now to thy friend, Bourtai!"

"Hold!" boomed Wan Tengri. "Hold there, thou soulless apekin!"

Bourtai spun around to face him, and the hunching of his shoulders above the iridescent globe of the crystal ball was darkly evil. Behind him was the group of his thieves' guard, each bearing on his shoulder a hulk with the form of a corpse. And ever above them the tower sparkled in the breath of the flame wind. Across the narrowing cubits between them, he could feel the hostile glare of Bourtai's eyes and, as he strode on, a roseate glow bloomed in the air over Wan Tengri's head and a sibilant, mocking whisper he had learned to know and dread spoke from the air, or perhaps within his own heart.

"Stand, slave, and wait for thy masters! See, the ground has imprisoned thy feet!"

Wan Tengri's brows knotted into a lowering frown. The things he had learned in the arena: a sword changed to a snake in his hand, yet it still could kill a man and when he hurled it from him it rang like steel upon a brass shield. A pillar of flame had roasted him, yet when he grasped it—the fire was gone.

"My magic is greater than thine, thou wizard of the twisted soul," Wan Tengri thundered. "The boots of Kasimer cannot hold me." He believed it, and the pale-red light above his head flickered

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and died—and the ground did not hold him. His strides lengthened toward Bourtai.

The scrawny arm of the wizard shot high from his brown rags and a flaming sword suddenly glowed in his hand. "To me, red guards," he cried. "To me, guards in silver and gold and purple. To the defense of the All-High."

He spoke, and his voice was drowned in the crash of marching feet, in the clank of steel swords upon brazen shields, and a great roar went up from many throats. The beggars about him threw off their rags and revealed themselves in shining brass and scarlet tunics of the guard. The corpselike figures they carried sprang to life, and there were a score more of the armored men. Wan Tengri's fist tightened on his sword and one hand flew to the bow about his throat—then his hands dropped and he laughed, threw back his head and laughed again.

"My magic is greater than thine, Monkey-face," he cried. "Thy phantom hosts cannot harm me!"

He strode on, and the tramp of marching feet died and beggars in rags fumbled their daggers and slunk from his path to catch up again, defensively, their burdens of salt—and Wan Tengri stood face to face with Bourtai.

"Now, Bourtai," he said gently, "I thank thee for performing this little task for thy master. I will take now the crystal ball!"

THE WIZARD'S eyes were glittering black fires, and his wrinkled monkey's face was an animal mask of rage. His shoulders hunched like a vulture's above the crystal ball; then, abruptly, he cackled. He bobbed his head and held out the crystal ball.

"Aye, Wan Tengri," he giggled. "Thou art the godson of the wind-devils! Thou art the man!"

Wan Tengri accepted the crystal ball in his left hand, and his thick fingers curled around its base while he stared down into the thousand colors that swirled in its depths. It was featherlight, this ball of crystal. Wan Tengri rolled his heavy shoulders and lifted his head to glare on the Flame Tower.

"Let down the bridge," he called shortly. "I am the man." He stepped to the wall of the moat beside the spot where the drawbridge must fall, and gestured to the beggars. "Down there is a hole where my magic has sucked out the flames. Throw down thy sacks of magic salt into the moat." He passed his hand over the crystal in a mystical gesture and smiled in his beard. "Winds of the heaven that sired me," he cried, "I bid thee close this moat!"

Behind him, he heard the creak of the lowering drawbridge. Out of his eye corners, he peered toward Bourtai. The small man was rubbing his monkey's face with a scrawny hand. "Aye, Wan Tengri," he murmured, "thou didst indeed learn things from Death."

The timbers of the drawbridge thudded to the stone wall of the moat, and Wan Tengri set casual foot upon it. "Flee, thieves," he ordered softly. "Flee before the wrath of six wizards and their piebald hosts. Bourtai, follow me."

With no backward glance then, Wan Tengri strode across the drawbridge that seemed to stretch into infinity. Above him, the tower was incredibly tall and, on either hand, its beauty shone down into the damp traces of the moat. Already, the ditch was beginning to fill again. He was conscious of the rank, putrid odors from the muddy silt, of another sharper tang that had stung his nostrils once before when the moat of besieged Antioch had burst into flame—and he smiled a little and listened to the hard rhythm of his feet upon the hollow boards, heard the lighter scamper of Bourtai hastening after him. From the wall of the tower, a narrow tongue of yellow flame flowed out, spread dancing across the moat's floor.

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Wan Tengri did not hasten his steps. The portcullis was up and the peaked arch of the doors was swinging open in the tower wall. Wan Tengri carried the crystal ball gently on the palm of his hand and put down his heels with a harder, steadier rhythm. There were shouts in the distance, and this time he thought there was no enchantment about them. The guards of the wizards were rallying.

He stepped from the bridge to the marble ramp before the doors, beneath the portcullis, and the bridge chains began to creak in their pulleys as it once more lifted toward the tower. Bourtai scrambled and fell, cursing in a shrill voice; then he was silent, and they were pacing through the wide-open doors.

An aged woman and an aged man flung themselves down on bony knees, and their voices were a rasping whisper: "Indeed, thou art the man!"

Wan Tengri grunted: "Get your creaking bones off that cold floor, or they'll be aching for a month. Take me to the princess."

His eyes quested everywhere. The carpets that clung to the walls were mildewed and ragged and everywhere was the taint of dust and decay. A spider had laid its web across a suit of armor against the wall. *Phagh!* And was this the treasure of Turgohl that he had fought for, that Kassar had died to give him? Wan Tengri spat upon the marble floor.

Torches threw their lurid, smoky glare and, through the arrow slits in the wall, the dance of the flames began to show. Yellow shadows chased themselves across the high ceilings. A great stone fireplace was cold and dark. Bourtai plucked at his arm, and there was malicious glee in his cracked voice.

"Surely, master, thy magic, which is so much greater than mine, can transform all this to gold and jewels?"

"Like thy soul, Monkey-face," Wan Tengri jeered, "it would fly from my hand."

The aged man and woman rose laboriously from the stones and bowed, backing away from him. Each side of the broad marble stairs that led upward, they paused and gestured that he was to mount. The steps were dusty and bore the traces of dirty feet, and as Wan Tengri moved toward them, a fat gray rat popped from the darkness to scamper across his path. The claws made a loud noise in the silence, and Wan Tengri's tread raised echoes. The shouts from beyond the moat were louder, but the mounting dance of the flames intervened. They fluttered and hissed and burned with small splutterings that magnified inside these hollow walls.

BOURTAI scuttled past to hop along the steps just ahead and turn his bright black eyes upward to Wan Tengri's face. "Canst tell me now what Death told thee, master?"

Wan Tengri's bearded lips moved in a curling grin. "Dost think still to trick me, wizard? Why, then do thy best. Death said to me: 'Who rules the princess, rules Turgohl.' And Death said: 'Ask of the crystal ball how that is done.'" Wan Tengri tossed the crystal ball lightly into the air and caught it again on his palm while a gasp of aged, frightened breath sounded from the two servitors behind him. "Perhaps, my apish man, thou hast read the riddle of the ball? Yes, yes, I know thy name is Bourtai, but answer my question."

Bourtai shook his head, a quivering, nervous gesture. "If it spoke, 'twas in a language these ears of mine did not know. Nor could I see ought save swirling color in its depths."

Here, where the stairs had made a full course about the walls of the tower, was a platform of marble, and in the wall was set a door, dull like lead. There was an inscription in a strange and flowing script carved above it.

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"Announce me, Bourtai." Wan Tengri's voice held mockery. "Announce me to this princess of thine, that we may see what it is we must rule."

Bourtai skipped toward the door, yet paused to twist about his gray-wisped head. "Rule for a day, master, so sayeth the prophecy." His fingers scratched the leaden surface and the door swung inward, creaking. The thin, off-tune tinkling of a lute twanged on Wan Tengri's ears, and he saw a great, dusty-draped bed set upon a dais. He saw a doll carved from wood and clothed in a tarnished bit of brocade. He stepped to the door as Bourtai croaked: "Princess, he is the man."

Wan Tengri's eyes swept the barren chamber and found a small figure hunched on a cushion, cross-legged before a leaping, fuelless fire. A child's grave gray eyes lifted to his beneath a calm, white brow, and her hair was burnished like gold where it rippled to the floor. Slender fingers toyed with the strings of a lute and he saw that one bit of string was broken. Hesitantly, the princess smiled—a child of seven.

"Come in, man," she said in a tinkling thin voice. "Did you bring me a new toy?"

Wan Tengri could not hold the scowl that had set upon his forehead. He grinned and there was no fierceness in his face at all. "Why, now, little lady," he said gently, "you might call it a toy. So you might. Men have fought for it and men have died for it, but it is no more than a pretty bauble." He held out on his palm the crystal ball. Light from the fire danced across its surface and a thousand bright colors glowed in its heart, crimson and purple and blue and green, gold and silver and, where Bourtai's envious eyes turned upon it, two little specks of black.

The princess dropped her lute and clapped her tiny hands. "Oh, a new toy for me! I have had no new toy in seventeen years." She held out her cupped palms for the crystal ball.

"Master," Bourtai protested hoarsely, "do not give it to her. Evil will come of this!"

Wan Tengri laughed, and the sound of it was soft thunder in the narrow room. "Now, thou art a very wolf among thieves, apeling, to steal a child's bauble. Catch, princess." He tossed the crystal ball lightly through the air. It spun like a soap bubble, and seemed as light. It glanced from the princess' hands and, striking with a thin, musical tinkle against the rocks of the fireplace, it burst and fell in a thousand glancing fragments.

The princess clasped her hands to her face. "It is done," she whispered. "It is done."

And even as she spoke, her stature increased, and the robes she wore began to glow and sparkle with gems. A perfume wafted through the room and, where the ball had fallen, flowers grew—flowers whose petals were gems of ruby and diamond and chrysoberyl. And, staring at the transformation, at the beautiful woman who lifted a tear-stained face, Wan Tengri threw back his head again to laugh.

"Did I not say, Bourtai, that a crystal globe was made to break?"

THE PRINCESS gazed at him with her gray eyes and a soft flush stole up her throat, and Wan Tengri's smile grew uncertain on his lips. Under his lids, his eyes took on a wary light.

"Thou are the man," the princess whispered. "Thou hast come to save me and my city. Claim thy reward. Claim any three wishes thou canst make and, within the scope of my city and my power, they shall be yours." Her cheeks grew rosy and her head bowed like a drooping flower.

Wan Tengri cleared his throat and Bourtai tugged at his arm to whisper shrill advice. A movement of a stout

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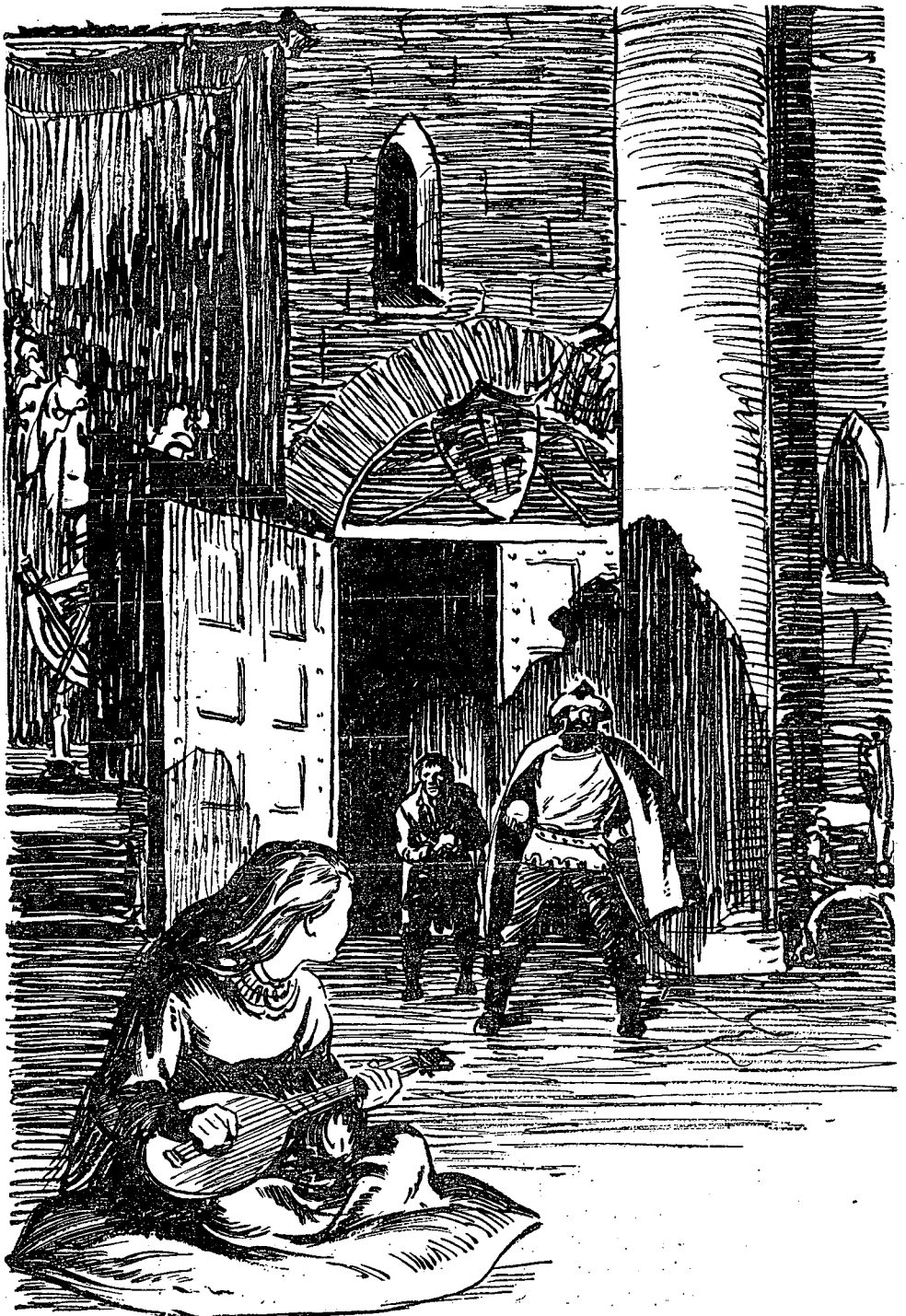

Speculatively Prester John weighed the crystal bubble in his hand. "Crystal," he said softly, "was made to be broken!"

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arm brushed him aside. "Why, as to that, princess," Wan Tengri said heavily, "it is a bit beforehand to speak of rewards. There are six wizards still abroad within thy city with many thousand armed men. And there is one small wizard within thy walls that wants some careful handling."

"He shall be hanged," the princess said shortly. "As for the other wizards and their guards, you will destroy them."

Wan Tengri looked at her, and the smile crept back to his mouth-corners. "Yes," he said. "Oh, yes, of course—princess." He swung on his heel, while Bourtai scuttled close against his side.

"Protect me, master," he whispered. "Against her magic, I am helpless. It took the combined power of our seven magics to subdue her, and even then we could not prevent thee from coming. Protect me. My neck is too thin and soft to bear the gripe of a rope."

"Stay, man," whispered the princess. "Where do you go?"

Wan Tengri checked on the threshold. "Why, there is this small matter of destroying certain wizards to be attended to," he said, "before I may claim my reward—and I am rather anxious to grasp this same reward with my two hands."

The princess' rich lips curved in a smile of approval and promise. "I will await thee," she whispered.

"She will," Wan Tengri muttered to himself while he strode up the marble stairs. "She will. Did I not tell thee, Bourtai, these princesses are a waspish and arrogant lot?"

"Yet, master, she did not seem cold to me."

Wan Tengri snorted. "She has broken her toy," he said, and offered no other word. The cold walls of the tower were hung now with exquisite silks and the stairs were glistening white. He peered down and the aged crone and man were moving up the steps toward the room of the princess, and their rags were fine raiment, and their backs were straight. Jewels glinted as they walked. Wan Tengri snorted again. He had heard tales of these enchanted princesses and their castles. There should be a jinni somewhere about to carry the whole works off to some green and lovely isle, far from such things as wizards and armies. But lacking that—lacking that he must do some more fighting before he could loot. Wan Tengri sucked in a slow, resolute breath and turned in through another door that no longer resembled lead, but glowed softly with burnished gold. His eyes narrowed a little. Now, if he could carry such a door as that back to the narrow seas from which he came, that villa on the Lebanon hills might well become reality!

He swung through a lavish room and strode brusquely onto a balcony that projected out toward the Court of the Magic Fountain. Even here, the heat of those dancing flames hurled upward a gust and, through its quivering veil, he stared down upon the marble-paved court. It was paved now in a new way, with solid ranks of soldiers. Seven spokes of color stemmed from the center of the flaming moat, and those were the colors of the seven wizards, no longer divided but each an army to itself.

"Thy scarlet guards, small apeling, are with the others," Wan Tengri muttered to the thief. "Canst control them?"

Bourtai washed his clawlike hands in air. "How can that be, master?" he asked worriedly. "They do not know me, save as a tall, masked figure in red." He caught the sardonic gleam in Wan Tengri's eye, scanning his height, added hurriedly: "My magics achieve that for me. But it is rarely we wizards go among our men. There are captains."

Far beyond the white reaches of the city, with its graceful spires, the red moon was rising. It laid its scarlet tracery over the black waters of Baikul. Faintly, Wan Tengri could see the swaying mast of a ship, and his nostrils flut-

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tered wide as if, even above the odor of the burning, he could catch the clean scent of the sea. A mighty yearning filled him—and from below, a massed shout of ten thousand voices burst upon his ears. He peered down. Upon a raised litter in the midst of the throng, stood six tall, masked figures, and about them swirled white vapors that faded into rose, into blue, and back to rose again. The gaunt arms of those specters were raised and gesturing.

Across the heads of the grouped armies, a wave of flame swept, to swoop toward the tower. Wan Tengri narrowed his eyes, while leaping flames seemed to fight other flames there on the dark liquid of the circling moat. A triumphant shout went up from the assembled multitude, and for a moment Wan Tengri swore fiercely. Then he laughed.

"If thy wizard brothers' men seek to swim that moat, they will be sadly scorched. They think that our flames are dark, small wizard." The grin lingered in his mouth corners. "We will see what my own small magics can achieve."

FROM AROUND his neck, he unslung the mighty bow of horn. Men were spilling over the edge of the moat, and their screams lifted horribly into the night while the flames danced, unappeased.

"You wizards believe in your own medicines, don't you, *shaman?*" said Wan Tengri. "Well, that's right. "That's as it should be." He drew the gut to his ear and an arrow twanged downward through the flickering light. Before it could strike, Wan Tengri had loosed another and another. A masked figure in gold threw up its arms and pitched backward into the massed soldier ranks, and an instant later, a man in purple clutched at his chest where an arrow had taken strong, fatal root. As one man, the others leaped from their dais, and Wan Tengri's third arrow buried half its length in the wooden floor and quivered there, a black warning of doom.

Black fog eddied up above the platform, and from its heart a great thing of leathern wings and flaming jaws winged upward into the ceiling of the night. Four great vibrations of those wings and it was sweeping toward the balcony where Wan Tengri stood! He laughed and, quietly, unstrung his bow while Bourtai darted, screaming, inside the door. When Wan Tengri looked up again, the winged thing had vanished though the black fog still clustered and made his sure aim unavailing. Truly, he had learned things in the arena, and it was no wonder that the priests sought to slay those who survived their gods! Wan Tengri's eyes bored out toward the sea again. For a long moment, he stood there and then he turned his eyes elsewhere. There were armies between him and the sea, and if a man were to build an empire he must carry off his own richest with him. The armies might object—

Presently, Wan Tengri went back through the chamber and to the broad steps, and a woman bowed before him. "My lord, the princess commands your presence."

Wan Tengri grimaced, but made grave acknowledgment and followed her down the stairs and, on the lowest level, into a room he had not seen before. On one seat of a double throne sat the princess in her robes of state, and Bourtai cowered in Wan Tengri's shadow.

"Are my enemies yet dead?" the princess asked carelessly.

"A few are dead," Wan Tengri said gravely, "yet it requires a mighty magic to remove them all. It wants time."

"They can wait," the princess said impatiently. "I would give thee thy reward."

Wan Tengri's fiery red head was carried stiffly, and he braced his thick legs

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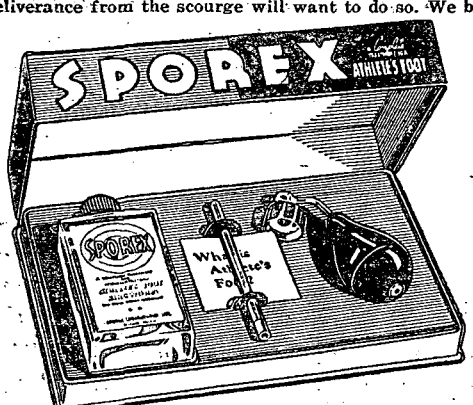

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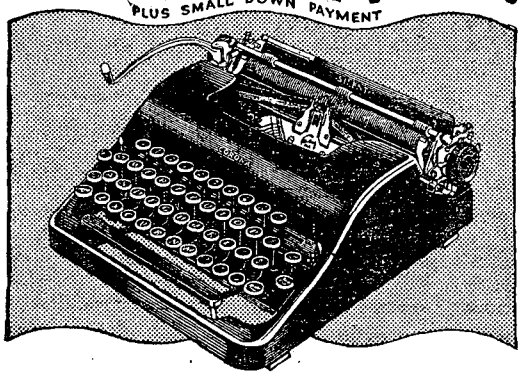

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WITH ASTHMADOR

apart to clap his fists to his hips. He frowned on this lovely, golden princess while Bourtai sniggered in his shadow. Yet Wan Tengri's rumbling voice was patient as he spoke:

"Princess, I am eager for thy rewards, but—well, come to think of it, there is a vow I made which I must fulfill before I can claim it."

"I absolve you of this vow, my lord."

Wan Tengri smiled grimly. "That lies beyond your power, small princess," he said. "For it was made to a god of whom you never heard, but before whom, presently, you shall bend the knee. By Ahriman, it behooves me, also, to bend a knee in gratitude—presently. Now, princess, I have work to do."

He whirled from the audience chamber and with the sweep of his eyes caught the gaze of the two servitors. "I will need your help," he said brusquely. "Every spear and every carpet must be carried to the topmost room of the tower. There, also, must be lengths of mighty rope. I go, princess, to build my magic and remove from thy doorstep the vermin that infest it."

The princess' face was pale and her head was regally lifted. "And how long, man, will these magics take?"

Wan Tengri bowed stiffly, for his proud back was not used to the practice. "Until the flame wind dies and blows again, princess," he said shortly, and swung from the chamber. He turned toward the door, and a score of men armored in white sprang into his path. Wan Tengri looked at them wearily, and plodded straight into the midst of the cluster at the door—and they faded into thin air. And behind him he heard the princess sob.

"Thou canst rule her, master." Bourtai scuttled up the steps at his side. "Truly, thou canst rule her."

"For a day," rumbled Wan Tengri. "Truly, these prophecies of thine are sound. How much longer can any man rule a woman? For in ruling, he becomes— *Phagh!* My sense of humor is deserting me. Come, my fleet-fingered minion of Ahriman, I have work

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for those same light fingers of thine before we can begin our tampering with the flame wind—and we can get our hands on a slightly different reward than the princess intends. For look you, Bourtai, I want only gold."

IX.

IN THE topmost room of the tower of the princess, where the howl of the flame wind was never still, and its small, hot fingers dragged shrieking sounds from the walls, Wan Tengri labored throughout the night and drove Bourtai and the two servitors of the princess relentlessly.

"Aye," groaned Bourtai, "never have I seen such laborious magic. My own enchantments are simple things and easily achieved."

Wan Tengri laughed. "And as easily broken, Monkey-face! This is a magic that not all the power of the wizards of Kasimer shall disrupt, nor all their ten thousand men."

Bourtai sighed and hauled another carpet across the floor to be lashed to the last. "Yet, so much magic seemeth to my feeble brain as necessary. Not all my strongest enchantments prevailed against thee, nor did those of my six pleasant brothers."

Wan Tengri straightened and strode toward the door. "It is the magic of ten thousand swords that I fear, my small wizard. What man has done, other men can undo—and I know not how long the flaming moat will hold them in check. I doubt, Bourtai, that they would allow me another three battles in the arena, and thou art doomed, whether by the rope of the princess or the magic of thy brothers!"

"Ah, don't say that, master," pleaded Bourtai. "Surely, thy shadow will protect me!"

Wan Tengri grinned in his beard as he moved swiftly down the stairs to come presently to the throne room where the princess toyed with her jeweled scepter. She looked up quickly as he entered, then turned her face away. Wan Tengri bowed gravely.

"I shall need thy magic, too, princess," he said somberly. "Where is the fount of thy flaming moat?"

The princess shifted impatiently on her throne. "I care nothing for such matters."

"And yet without it, my princess"—Wan Tengri moved toward the throne—"my magic cannot avail. Think you, if I fall in battle, will those four wizards who still hold sway beyond the moat deal kindly with thee? Or will they—master thee?"

The princess' gray eyes fled to his for protection. "You say these things to frighten me, my lord."

For an instant she was like a terrified child, and Wan Tengri's smile softened. "Nay, if I frighten thee, it is because the fear is in myself as well. Ten thousand men, princess, wield a magic that no wizard can overpower. It is curved like a flower's stem, but its edge is keen as the northern wind! It is called a sword."

The princess rose stiffly to her feet and put her small, trembling hand in that of Wan Tengri. "Come, I will show you. There is a cistern that is never empty, if we use it carefully. It was built by my father long years ago, and there are springs, but it cannot be drunk. It is a magic water whose taste is foul and whose smell is rank, and, more wondrous, it burns."

When Wan Tengri had seen the great dark cistern and sniffed the pungency of its liquid—a good crude oil, had he known it—and had learned the operation of its outlet, he led the princess back to her throne.

"In a few hours, at the Hour of the Serpent, my princess," he said gently, "the flame wind will die and certain

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things can be done. Then I will cause your herald to sound a blast and announce to these besieging armies that when once more the flame wind blows, when the evening Hour of the Dragon comes, thou wilt—treat with them. I think it may gain us those hours of grace, princess."

ON HIS WAY up the winding stairway again, Wan Tengri walked with a frowning weariness. It might be he was wronging the princess; it might be that the prophecies were false and this was the land he was meant to rule. Certainly, he could dip his fingers into the treasure. Abruptly, he was grinning. By Ahriman, he was a fool to worry about tomorrow. Who knew whether, for him, tomorrow would come? There were ten thousand swords. Wan Tengri was humming through his nose strenuously when he punched open again the door of the topmost room.

When the flame wind died with the dawn, Wan Tengri stepped out upon the balcony that girdled the tower's crest. A dozen feet above him was the great flame of gold, and he eyed it with narrowed concentration. Presently, he circled a weighted end of rope about his head and flung it, whirling, about the base of the flame. On the third try, it returned to his hand and he rigged a noose about the flame for present use. He peered about the room inside where spears had been lashed end to end, and there were two great scrolls of carpet. Then, with a satisfied nod, he went swiftly down the stairs again.

From the balcony where first he had peered down upon the hosts of the wizards he gazed forth again, and summoned the herald to trump at his side. Over the sleeping horde, with their gay banners and their rainbow coats, the blast from the trumpet hurled its brazen note and men sprang to their feet, shouting. Over the edge of the balcony, Wan Tengri unfurled a scarf of pure white silk.

"Hearken, men," he sent his great voice eddying toward them. "Hearken

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to the words of the Princess of Turgohl! She greets her loyal subjects in the name of Christos, in whose name she conquers. At the evening Hour of the Dragon, the princess will treat with your masters, the wizards of Kasimer. She bids them come then, at the Hour of the Dragon."

For as long as he spoke, there was silence over the multitude, but as he ceased there was a mingled shout and the black streaks of arrows winged toward him. One glanced from the white silken flag under his hand and another caught the trumpeter beneath the breastbone. He pitched forward, spewing blood, but Wan Tengri stood stiffly at the rail. More arrows winged upward and he could hear now the *twang-twang* of a thousand bows. His eyes were bitter and once more they sought the blue of the open roadstead and the far glistening waters of Baikul. An arrow whimpered past his ear to rip painfully through his tangled, shoulder-length hair, and another skimmed the parapet to burn his hand. Wan Tengri turned heavily back to the tower.

They would wait, he thought, until the Hour of the Dragon, and they would plan to assault then. If his "magic" worked, there would be many dead before the Hour of the Serpent came again —and Wan Tengri might well be among them. For a day, it was said, he would rule. When the dark Hour of the Ox came, that day would be ended. He fought for his saving humor, and it would not come. Heavily, he flung himself down upon a couch and slept.

It was late when he awoke to find Bourtai crouched at his side, and there was a shivering that jerked at the wizard's small bones and that would not cease.

"Master," he whispered, "the Hour of the Dragon draws near."

Wan Tengri dragged himself to his feet and stood with his broad hands knotted at his sides. Within the hour— He laughed briefly. "Come to the tower room, Bourtai. Thy magic must fight with mine this day, or—"

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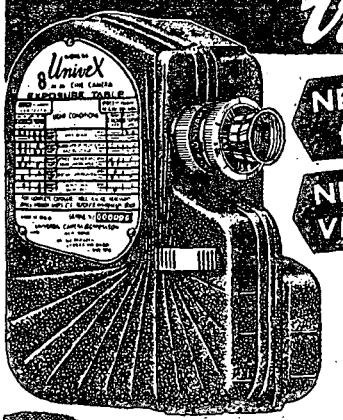

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"Or the rope!" whispered Bourtai. "All day, the princess hath watched me with cat's eyes, and there is a mouse's soul trembling in my breast."

Wan Tengri laughed sharply. "They tell the tale that once a mouse helped a lion, small monkey-thing. Pray to your various gods that the analogy holds and I fight like a lion this day."

"But thy magic, master?"

"My magic will need the strength of my good right arm," Wan Tengri said shortly. "Ten thousand men, Bourtai, and ten thousand swords. Ten thousand bows to hurl their arrows at this tower. Do thy fingers still itch for gold, Bourtai?"

Rapidly, Wan Tengri led the way up the tall tower and, at first, Bourtai scampered beside him with a thousand questions, but presently he fell back to trail, panting, behind the steady climb of his master's muscle-knotted legs. Once in the tower room, Wan Tegri went swiftly to work. He tested the strength of the double rank of spears he had lashed together, then to each end he fastened a scroll of carpets. This, presently—straining his powerful back—he lifted to the balcony, and when he had settled it into place, a scroll of carpets projected on each side of the tower. Rapidly, he worked at the lashings while white faces stared up from the Court of the Fountain. When he had finished with his rope braces, the spears lay like a yard across the mast of the tower, and he turned, panting, to face Bourtai.

"Thine, my mouse," he said softly, "will be the task of gnawing this lion's ropes when the trumpet blasts for the second time. But let the carpets down not too swiftly, or the spears are apt to break. If they do, there will be no saving that neck of thine!"

Bourtai stretched his neck and fumbled it with his clawed fingers. "Aye, master, they shall drop slowly, but I do not understand this magic of thine."

"If thou didst," Wan Tengri said dryly, "'twould be no magic. Wait for the second trumpet blast."

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HE TURNED back down the steps then, to find the princess waiting, white-faced and frightened, in the great main hall. Beyond the walls was the turmoil of men's angry voices. Her hands fluttered out to his.

"Thy magic, my lord. Quickly!"

Wan Tengri smiled, though the muscles across his shoulders were stiffening for battle, and his fiery head was thrown back with the challenge of death. "Nay, magic cannot be hurried, princess," he said gently. "Did it not take seventeen years to break the spell that held thee bound a child?"

The princess' eyes softened. "Yet there are other magics that take less time, and other spells!"

"There are those," Wan Tengri said harshly, "that last for a day." He crossed to the armor where a spider had nested, burnished now, and swiftly fitted on cuirass and helmet. "When the trumpet sounds the second time, princess, do thou open wide the outlet of that wondrous spring of thy father's. Thy magic, added to mine, will sweep the vermin from thy doorstep—I hope."

He bore his armor lightly as he bounded up the stairs once more to the room where he had slept, and there girded on his sword and caught his newly strung bow in his hand. If today the wizards broke the truce with assault of arrows, there would be an answer worthy of them! He strode to the balcony, stared down at the arrow-pierced corpse of the princess' man. The last rays of the sun gilded his death-drawn face.

"And you waited seventeen years for this," he said. "Well, mayhap, I shall find some such answer today!"

He caught up the man's trumpet and stepped to the verge of the balcony where the white scarf was spread again. Already the sun was half swallowed by the Suntai hills. He set the trumpet to his mouth and the blast he blew with unfamiliar lips wavered and broke, roared loud and strong. Silence fell, but there was laughter in the nearest line of the faces of the guards. So they did not like his trumpeting? Wan Tengri scowled down at them.

"I am the man," he cried. "I speak for the princess. Where are these motley wizards of thine?"

The ranks of the guards parted then, and he saw the masked figures of the four wizards who still survived. They stood silently, and Wan Tengri, scanning the army warily, saw men with drawn and ready bows hidden near them. Aye, he had expected that.

"Fakirs of Kasimer," he sent his thundering voice down at them, "three of thy number have gone. To you four who remain, for a little while, I give the message of the princess. You will withdraw your armies and disband them and surrender yourselves to her mercy. Refuse, and you die!"

Jeering laughter and shouts broke from the multitude and, amid their ranks, a trumpet sang clearly. Wan Tengri cursed, then grinned wolfishly as a thick flight of arrows winged toward his balcony. Themselves had done it, had signaled the releasing of his magic!

As he whipped his own stout bow into line and notched an arrow to the gut, the last red lip of the sun flicked below the verge of the hills and there was only the upleaping flames from the moat, tossing their red menace upon the faces of the host. By it, the four masked figures stood out boldly, but the ranks were already closing about them at the signal of that trumpet blast. The great bow twanged as swiftly as hand could notch arrow, and six shafts lanced downward in an eye wink of time.

A guard sprang in front of one masked figure with an upthrown shield—and went down, his shield pinned to his skull. The second arrow, following in

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that same groove, struck down through a masked wizard's throat and drove him, kicking, to the ground. But the other shafts found lesser flesh. Wan Tengri felt the bite of an arrow in his left arm and cursed as he fell back out of range. He could do little enough now. His arrows were best saved, for when his magic began to work—

His fingers groped for the arrow in his arm while his eyes peered upward where the most distant light of the flames showed. Yes, his carpet scrolls were unrolling, reaching down. He peered warily over the side. The flames of the moat were leaping higher. Bourtai and the princess had done their work. His eyes scowled down at the arrow and he snapped off its head. His teeth set and he ripped the shaft free of his flesh with a curse. Better that it bleed for a while. He started into his chamber, yet paused for a while. There was a sighing in all the high air, a sighing that changed to a rising moan, that presently would shriek and howl. The flame wind had begun to blow!

ONE MORE glance he threw at the uncurling carpets. They were dropping swiftly now, for Bourtai would have ducked inside at the first faint puff of the flame wind. They bellied like sails beside the mast of the tower and, like sails, too, they would curl the flame wind down into the heart of the city. The high-leaping flames of the moat would ride with it, and— The first hot gush of that down-turned wind eddied about Wan Tengri. The heat of it plugged his nostrils, clawed at his vitals with tiny, hot talons. Strangling, retching from that first touch, Wan Tengri staggered into the tower and slammed shut the door of the balcony. He leaned against it, panting, and slowly he began to smile. They had not lied about the power of the flame wind!

He raced to the steps and Bourtai was clattering his sandals down from the heights. Below him, he heard the clear call of the princess' voice, and the one servitor who remained to her ran close at her heels.

"Thy magic, my lord?" called the princess. "Does it—succeed?"

"That is a thing we shall see," Wan Tengri said, with a tension that mocked his calm tones. He led the way upward to where a crystal globe was let into the tower wall, and through it they peered out into the madness of the Court of the Fountain. The high-leaping flames no longer clustered about the tower, but, blown downward by the fierce, turned pressure of the flame wind, guttered out in lancing spears of crimson and gold across the floor of the court itself. The flame winds of the evening, sweeping high across the city, were being caught by the upreaching tower, and the sail of carpet scrolls. Turned downward from their level course across the city, they swept down the carpets, down the side of the tower, and thence across the moat of burning crude oil. Like a mighty blow torch fed by the superheated winds deflected by his carpets, the gushing flames fled in flattened, angry tongues across the courtyard. A windrow of blackening bodies fringed the moat and, farther away where the outmost ranks of the ten thousand had stood, men were fighting savagely to escape. Swords whirled and flashed above their heads, and death crept toward them. Men writhed to the ground where the flames licked and beyond their reach, other men were staggering, clutching at their throats with maddened hands.

The princess laughed aloud and clapped her hands in glee. "Thy magic works, my lord. My enemies die by the hundred, by the thousand." Her fingers bit into Wan Tengri's arm.

Bourtai dropped to his knees and beat his forehead on the floor. He pressed his writhing, ancient lips to Wan Ten-

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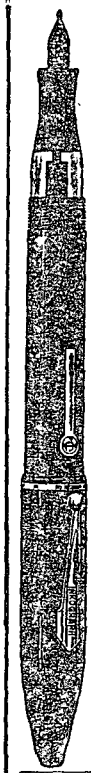
gri's foot. "Thou art the greatest wizard of them all, master. Forgive thy slave that ever he dared to doubt or to oppose thee."

Wan Tengri peered down at that scene of slaughter with sunken, bitter eyes, and there was no smile on his lips, no laughter in his heart. Yes, they died, and there had been brave men in that army, such men as even Prester John would have joyed to cross swords with. They died—horribly. Wan Tengri jerked his arm from under the princess' hand, and his foot from the grip of Bourtai, and went heavily, slowly down the stairs. His sword clanked against his thigh, and the familiar bite of the bowstring was across his throat.

"Prester John, magician," he said thickly. "Magician, ha!"

Outside, he could hear nothing save the shriek of the wind and the bellowing fire. The screams of the dying were mercifully blotted out, or had long ago strangled in their throats. The air was heavy with the scorching of stone and the reek of the moat fire; no worse stenches came, since the wind swept them out over the city. He stood in the wide main corridor on braced legs and waited. Above him, the princess still shrieked in glee, as he should be doing. These men had slaughtered Kassar, and many another stout soldier—and they stood between him and wealth. He shrugged his shoulders, lifted his head, and Bourtai was cowering before him.

"Master, the last of them is dead or fled," he gasped. "Never has there been



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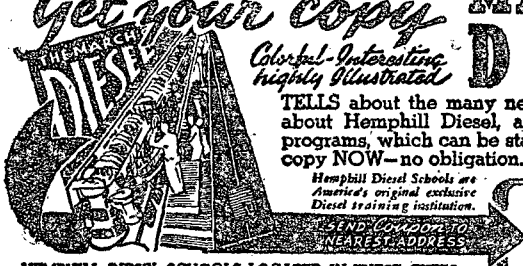

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such slaughter as with this magic of thine. But now, while they flee, we should strike. We must march to the Temple of Ahriman and seize the treasury."

Wan Tengri managed a smile. "So, one more lie is revealed, small wizard. Didst know where the treasure was hidden."

"It is thy treasury now, lord."

Wan Tengri grunted. "I have earned it. Go to my chamber and wilt find two pots of black, stinking liquid. Empty them on some part of the carpets and throw a torch against the spot. We will soon be rid of the flame wind, now we have no need of it."

"But the fires about the tower, master?" cried Bourtai. "How may we pass them by?"

Wan Tengri said shortly: "Thou didst help my magic there, Bourtai. Canst not recall?"

"Master, I helped thee? Nay, we did but throw some salt bags into the moat." His face was eager, pleading. "How can that be?"

Wan Tengri rolled his shoulders. "Salt melts in boiling water," he said curtly. "It melts quite rapidly. There were many bags, else even the cold water on which flows this magic black brew of the princess would have taken care of it long ago. Within the hour, the moat will suck itself dry again. Flame will race along these salt tunnels of thine, mayhap, and certain buildings will be destroyed. But marble does not carry flame and the fire will not last long. Go, rid me of my magic carpets, and then tell the princess to put on her state robes." He grinned sourly. "She will walk on the bodies of her enemies to Ahriman's temple. She'll have to—else never again cross the Court of the Magic Fountain!"

BOURTAI'S feet scampered like the claws of a rat up the marble steps and, presently, there was a new, higher leaping of the flames from the moat and the sigh of the flame wind lifted and became remote. The stench of burned flesh came through clearly and Wan Tengri's lips drew thin. Tomorrow, or the next day, he would begin to boast of this exploit, how his single-handed magic had slain ten thousand men. But he would not need to boast. The wandering troubadours would pick up the theme, and for centuries, perhaps, or as long as a father's memory passed on to his son, the story would be told to the whining of one-string fiddles. Wan Tengri's back stiffened. Prester John had made a name to be proud of, an empire in the East. It was no small exploit that, single-handed, he had turned back the wizard hordes.

He began slowly to pace back and forth across the corridor and presently he was humming through his nose. The ceremonially slow step of the princess on the stairs pulled his head that way, and he caught his breath in admiration. She was gowned in exquisite white and her golden hair flowed out from beneath a golden crown. Behind her, the woman servitor carried the train of her robe of state, and Bourtai leaned over the railing behind her to whisper, excitedly:

"The flame dies from the moat, master, even as thou has said. Truly, thy magic takes care of all things, though it be a strange magic."

Wan Tengri smiled thinly. One thing his magic could not contrive, to keep the princess' pure white robe clean while she crossed the width of the Court of the Fountain. Hiding his grin in his beard, Wan Tengri swept a stiff-backed bow and backed to swing wide the main doors of the tower, to release the mechanism of the drawbridge and let it clatter down. The princess lifted her chin in arrogance as she paced leisurely toward the drawbridge. The last flames were flickering out of the moat and; yon-

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der, three hundred cubits away, a warehouse began to burn, rolling black, stinking smoke across the white buildings of the city. The princess marched out and Wan Tengri walked on her left and two paces to the rear. He pulled his eyes away from her and sent them probing over the shadows among the buildings. The curs that had escaped his magic must still be lurking there, and he had a pitifully small band with which to sack a city. His hand closed tautly about his sword hilt—and he saw the princess had stopped.

The nauseous odor of burned human flesh made Wan Tengri's stomach jerk, but his face was impassive. He stepped to the princess' side as she faltered at the end of the drawbridge. Here, in her immediate path, was nothing that could be called human, but farther on, the silken tunics still smoldered on a few bodies and beyond that, the men slain by the flame wind were tossed in the careless undignity of death.

"It is a proud day for you, princess." Wan Tengri's voice was deep with irony. "Few rulers are given to walk across the bodies of their enemies to the throne!"

The girl's white face turned up to his and she smiled, but there was coldness in her eyes. "It is good to see them dead, but their stench offends me. Thou shalt carry me, my lord."

Behind the tower, the red fragment of the Mating Moon was rising, and its glow was ghostly across the dead, across the white buildings of Turgohl. Another building was burning, the high tower of Bourtai, where Wan Tengri had briefly stolen his soul.

"It may not be, princess," Wan Tengri said shortly. "My sword arm must be free, for others of thy enemies surely lurk among those buildings, hiding from my magic. Walk proudly, princess—and hold your train high."

He dropped back and his sardonic eyes combed the ranks of the dead. Who could say whether among these were the wizards of Kasimer, or whether they

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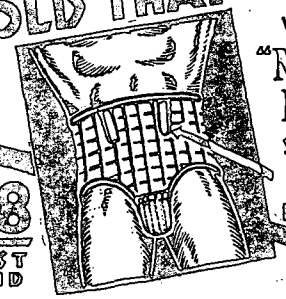

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still marshaled the remnants of their cohorts in the shadow of the Temple of Ahriman? His gaze reached to the shadows ahead.

"Bourtai," he murmured, "canst find thy thieves?"

"It may be, master."

"Then do so. Arm them from the dead and bid them follow in the shadows. And remember, Bourtai, my magic is greater than thine, and it reaches beyond the borderline of Death—I, who conquered Death in the arena, tell you this."

Bourtai dropped to his knees. "Master, lord, sire—if ever I betray thee—"

"Why, then I shall crop thy neck, apeling. Begone." Bourtai darted like a shadow among the dead and was gone, and the princess lifted her chin and began to pick a dainty way across the Court of the Magic Fountain, which hereafter, Wan Tengri thought, would bear a grimmer name. His eyes swung to the princess of the golden hair. There was the making of a ruler there, for she trod the way he had pointed, and her head was high. The woman behind her staggered and reeled in her efforts to follow, and once she dropped the train and clasped both hands to a nausea-tortured belly.

ACROSS the horror of the square, the princess led the way and, ever alert, Wan Tengri followed. He held an arrow on the gut of his bow. It suited his plans to have her move slowly. It would give Bourtai time to summon his thieves. They were poor stuff, but with what the wizard would tell them of the magic of Prester John perhaps they would take courage. He thought he heard a man cry out faintly, but couldn't be sure. He moved closer to the princess' side.

"Do I walk well, my lord?" her voice came back weakly.

"No conquering king," said Wan Tengri truthfully, "could walk better. Thou hast learned a lesson, small princess. Fix on the thing thou desirest and let

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nothing turn thee aside. Be bold. Be merciless that thou mayest later be kind by contrast. If a man oppose thy will, strike him down."

It was fine advice he gave, beyond a doubt, but there was the matter of the reward.

"And," he added thoughtfully, "always keep thy word."

"These lessons of thine have a certain pungency, my lord," said the princess, and her voice was strangled. "*Phagh,* these, my enemies, must have been an unclean lot in life to stink so after death!"

Wan Tengri caught a roar of laughter, that leaped unbidden to his lips, and admiration touched his gray eyes as he gazed on that upright golden head. The fire-scorched dead were behind them now, and there were only the scattered ranks of those that the flame wind had strangled. Almost, the Court of the Fountain was crossed and there was still no sign of life, nor of Bourtai and his thieving rascals. A breath of worry touched Wan Tengri's mind. Had he been wrong to think Bourtai conquered, and slave to his will? Wan Tengri plucked at the bowstring. Well, here was a resolver of all doubts!

At last, the court was overpassed, and here were only a scattered few of the dead. The one broad way of Turgohl lay straight from here to the towering bulk of the Temple of Ahriman. The princess dropped the train of her skirt and took the middle of the way, and Wan Tengri saw that she had kept it remarkably clean, what with one thing and another. His eyes were keener now to probe the shadows, and there was a tautness that almost made his bowstring fingers quiver. Far off in the darkness, a dog or a wolf lifted a high howling. Afterward, there was a greater silence into which the moan of the flame wind thrust mournfully. The princess' feet made light, quick sounds upon the cobbles, and now and again Wan Tengri's sword clanked.

This might be a city of the dead, so closely had the people inclosed themselves behind their locked doors and battened walls. And that was the wise way of citizens everywhere. The conquest of the armies meant little so that they were not looted. Through their streets, the battle would rage and red host slaughter green, or silver curse the gold. In the end, the doors of the houses would open and things would go on very much as before, save that one man would be richer and another poorer. Well, so that he was one of the richer ones! He shifted his taut shoulders and something rasped against the flesh of his chest—the bit of wood from the True Cross.

"Rest easy, Christos," Wan Tengri whispered. "One hundred thousand was the pledge, and this soldier's word is true as silver in the vault. Tonight, thou shalt have thy first installment—and I live. For look you, the princess has granted me three wishes. It is true that I will be wise to make the wishes she wants me to make—"

The attack came with no more warning than a hoarse shout from the darkness. Suddenly, from the dark lanes that knifed between stone walls on two sides of this broad way, men debouched. Wan Tengri could not glimpse the colors of their tunics, but their armor glinted in the faint light. All Wan Tengri's tension left him in a great roar of sound that drove from his throat. His war bow began to pluck out its base lute notes of the song of Death. Swiftly as he could whip them free from his quiver, he sent his arrows whistling through the dark, and each found its new quiver in soldier flesh.

A half score of notes, the bowstring sang, and on this left flank there were no more enemies. On the moment, the princess cried out, but it was in anger not fear. A man had seized her in his

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arms and lifted her aloft. Wan Tengri sprang that way with his sword whining from its sheath, but before he could reach the spot, the white arm of the princess rose and fell, and the man who bore her pitched to the ground.

INSTANTLY, Wan Tengri had leaped past her to attack the others, and his sword darted like a flame. "Ha, does thy throat trouble thee? 'Twill not for long. And that right arm of thine? It will pain thee no more. Ha!" His great, surging battle laughter roared up to the heavens. It was Prester John who fought; Hurricane John, with a sword of lightning in his hand. Two men charged at him with raised blades, and Prester John leaped between them. His dragging scimitar sliced a man's head off clean, whirled in his hand to catch the second soldier as he turned. Steel met steel, and it was the soldier's blade that faltered, that flew through the dark night air, glittering in two parts.

The man dropped to his knees. "Mercy, sire. I know thee now. Thou art—"

The princess' arm struck down from behind, and her stinging dagger in his spine cut short his words. For an instant, they were clear of enemies, and gray eyes sought gray. "Be merciless, thou sayest, my lord," said the princess.

A bowstirng twanged and Wan Tengri felt the punch of an arrow between his shoulder blades. He swayed, whirled with his bow in hand again while his sword clashed as it leaped to his teeth. The taste of blood was warm and salty upon it—and the bowstring was singing. That blow between his shoulders. Had it penetrated his armor? There were few with the strength to draw so strong a bow, and yet he did not know this metal that cased him. There was a prick and drag on his shoulder muscles. *Phagh!* It was no more than a pin prick!

There were sharp, new shoutings in the dark. Shadows flitted along the rear of the armored men, and a cracked, shrill voice sounded from the night: "Save thy arrows, sire; they are not needed!"

Wan Tengri's bow checked in mid-draw. "Each time Bourtai speaks," he muttered, "I am promoted a little. Now it is sire. Next will he dub me god. Nay, Christos, I meant no offense. Princess, an arrow pricks my back. Be pleased to draw it forth."

He felt a minor tear of flesh and then he was facing the princess again, seeing the arrow and the dagger in her hands. Her white dress was ruined now, but these were honorable stains. Wan Tengri said, with deep sincerity: "Princess, thou wilt make a great ruler. Never doubt it. It is time, I think, that we hastened to the temple. Bourtai," he lifted his voice. "Follow us."

"Sire, it is done!"

Once more, the princess' small feet made their slight echoes, but now they were drowned in the heavier tramp of other feet keeping ragged time. There were scampering steps at Wan Tengri's elbow, and the whisper of a thin voice: "I tell thee, sire, thy princess is a very warrior. All the world could yield you no braver!"

Wan Tengri grunted and, presently, he followed the straight, narrow back of the princess up the steps of the temple of Ahriman and down the long hall with its fluted columns. The swirl of incense smoke wiped out the memory of filth. The tread of men was noisier, and Wan Tengri glanced about him, strangled a hard laughter. The thieves had armed themselves truly. Brass cuirasses, made for men, swung loosely about their hollow chests. The helmets slipped on their heads, but their swords, carried naked in their hands, were honorably stained and they walked lightly for all their weight of metal.

Wan Tengri's head whipped about at

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the whisper of a beginning chant. The shaven priests of Ahriman, in seven ranks of seven colors, were filing out before the idol of Ahriman, and once more Wan Tengri saw the fire flashes in the eyes of that awesome figure, heard the premonitory rumbling of speech from the idol.

"Your pardon, sire," Bourtai whispered. "I must go and work my own slight magic." He faded into the darkness among the temple columns, and Wan Tengri gestured the guard of thieves closer about the princess and himself.

"These priests will crown you, since you are strong now," he whispered in the ear of the princess, "but if you allow that, they will be stronger than you. Ahriman is a false god, for he could not destroy me. I will tell you the true god. Drive these priests forth."

The princess nodded. "I know nothing of gods," she said flatly, "but these priests seem arrogant."

She stepped forward and threw up her white, bloodstained arm. "Cease these noises," she said curtly. "I am thy princess and it is my command!"

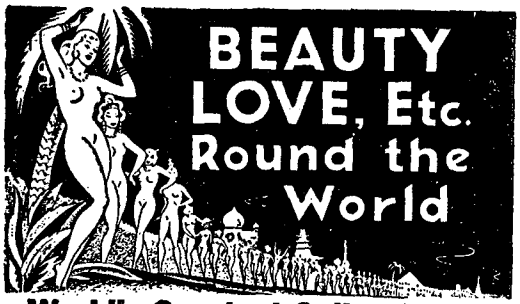
THE PRIESTS turned cynical eyes on her, and Wan Tengri plucked the string of his empty bow so that it sang thinly into the temple vault. At his gesture, the thieves struck steel against the brazen shields.

"It is the princess' command," Wan Tengri said, and deepened his voice.

"Here"—a thin-faced priest strode forward—"here, only Ahriman gives orders. We await the speech of Ahriman."

Wan Tengri took a half stride forward while his hand darted toward his sword, and he saw the jaws of the idol, Ahriman, champ open and a cracked voice, strangely deepened, and yet easily recognizable to the accustomed ears of Prester John, began to speak. He hid a smile.

"Aye, let Ahriman decide!" said Wan Tengri.



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Ahriman's judgment thundered through the temple. "The princess reigns! Her word is law! Flee, thou shavelings, and make way for the rightful ruler of Turgohl!"

The priests' ranks wavered in a momentary panic and, with a gesture, Wan Tengri sent his thieves against them. While the armored men marched ten paces forward, the ranks of the priests wavered, then broke and fled. The princess moved steadily forward, yet Wan Tengri saw that she was trembling.

"Surely," she whispered, "this is a god who speaks!"

"That," said Wan Tengri dryly, "is no more than our pet wizard, Bourtai, working his small magic." He whirled before the altar. "Let the people be summoned," he commanded. "Sound the alarms and bring them to the temple where a princess crowns herself!"

They two stood upon the steps of the altar now, tall man with head of fire and slim girl with her golden tresses, and the curtain of silver swung close behind them to block out the face and the figure of Ahriman.

"Surely now," said the princess softly, "surely now thou mayest claim thy rewards, my lord."

Prester John stood over her, glanced down at the bloodstains on her silken gown, at the glowing fire of her gray eyes. The princess was pleased to be pliant—just now.

"Aye," rumbled Prester John, "perhaps it is time. Hark to my words, princess. With my magic, I can see into the future. Thou wilt rule long and well, for thou hast the qualities of rulership. Thou art merciless and strong—yet thy woman's mercy will spare the weak. And it is plain that thou meanest to keep thy royal word."

"Why, yes," said the princess, blushing. "Why, yes, Prester John."

Prester John drew in a slow breath that strained his chest against its confining armor. He hesitated and his eyes were wary. "Two things I will ask of

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thee now. When thy people come and thou art crowned, thou shalt acknowledge Christos for thy true god, since he has set thee on thy throne. It happens I have made a vow."

"And is this thy god, my lord, this Christos?"

Wan Tengri laughed. "By Ahriman, it must be so, since he has brought me unharmed through various encounters. And so I must fulfill my vow, that a hundred thousand shall bow down and acknowledge him."

"A hundred thousand," said the princess, and her voice was wondering. "There are not so many in Turgohl, by half."

"Is it so?" marveled Wan Tengri, and hid the laughter in his eyes. Perhaps this would be easier than he had thought. "Is it so? Now, this is a serious thing, princess, for look you, and a man fulfill not his pledge to the gods, they withdraw their favor. Ah, but it is easy. Thou shalt equip for me, princess, a mighty galley and thou shalt give me riches upon it so that I may harry the Baikul sea in thy name, and in the name of Christos. Thus will thy stature be increased and I fulfill my vow." He watched her closely. It was a good excuse he had made under the spur of the moment.

The princess frowned a little. "It shall be done," she said, "and yet it seems to me thou art overanxious about this vow of thine. I would not take thee for a—devout man!"

Prester John lifted his mighty right arm and pointed a rigid finger upward. "No man may trifle with the gods," he thundered. Almost, he convinced himself.

The princess quailed a little. "No, I suppose not, Prester John, and it may be that I have wronged thee a little in my thoughts." People were beginning to throng in through the temple doors, packing along the walls behind the columns, staring toward this blood-dappled man and woman who stood before the silver cloth of Ahriman, flanked by curi-

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ous guards who seemed too small for their armor; at a small, wizened man who wore a gorgeous gown of cloth-of-gold and squatted at the feet of the two. They saw him reach out and pluck at the flaming tunic of the sun-haired man.

"Sire," whispered Bourtai, "sire, the people come."

"Aye," Prester John answered. "Princess, my third wish"—he leaned over her and his eyes blazed down into hers—"my third wish must wait until we have taken care of this business."

THE PRINCESS flushed. "Aye, must it?" she muttered. "Very well." She faced toward the assembling multitudes and before she spoke there was no doubt that she ruled, for at the proud arrogance upon her face, the people dropped upon their knees.

"It is well," said the princess coldly. "You acknowledge me thy ruler. Therefore, for the present, I will be merciful. I will forget that for seventeen years thou didst allow me to molder under enchantment in my tower—until a stranger should free me. If you wish to see what happens to those from whom my mercy is withdrawn—gaze on the Court of the Magic Fountain."

She was silent, and a murmur came from the kneeling host: "Thou art the ruler."

To Wan Tengri's ears, it had a monotonous sound. He shifted uneasily on his feet and found Bourtai's eyes pleadingly upon him. Bourtai stood on tiptoe to whisper: "She is very lovely, Wan Tengri, and a fit mate for thee."

Wan Tengri glowered and did not answer. He had felt the pull of the girl's spirit, and of her lovely flesh. It might be she was part of the kingdom he would carve in this fabulous, wealthy East. It might be—

"You will rise, my people," said the princess, "and you will bow again to the new god, Christos, who has freed me through his disciple, Prester John."

The people obeyed, and the princess turned impatiently to Prester John. "Now then, fifty thousand have bowed to thy Christos, or shall before I am through. Tomorrow, that same fifty thousand could bow again—"

"Nay," rumbled Prester John. "It will not serve. I have thy promise, princess."

"Aye." The princess' eyes were cool. "Aye, and there is still that third wish."

"There is," Prester John acknowledged.

The princess turned to the people. "Fifty men will remain," she said curtly. "Those who own galleys and those who own slaves. Do not seek to evade me, for my wizards know you all."

Men shambled forward and the princess regarded them with a calm air of possession. "The largest galley in the harbor will be outfitted for Prester John, who is my high councilor and the commander of my army and my fleet. You will man it with slaves and soldiers. Send fifty slaves here to bear riches to that galley. That is all; you may go." She turned to Prester John and there was a question and a warning in her voice: "Thou seest, Prester John, I keep my promises."

Prester John stood over her, and there was a grim tightening of his mouth corners, and there was a part of him that wanted one thing, and there was a part that wanted another. And there was his reason that saw the flaw.

"Princess," he said, with harshness in his voice, "I am a free man and a free soul, even as thou art. We are two strong people, thou and I."

"We are two strong people," the princess acknowledged, and there was still a questioning reserve in her voice.

"Would you then bow the knee to me?" Prester John demanded roughly.

"Oh, gladly, Prester John!"

"And for how long?"

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Bourtai was plucking at Prester John's sleeve and his small whisper reached up to his ear faintly. "Careful, sire. Oh, tread carefully! Thou walkest a way from which no man can turn back. Once thou hast spoken—"

The crushing weight of Prester John's hand upon Bourtai's shoulder shut off his words.

"For how long, princess?" Prester John insisted. "Thou who canst be merciless and can be bold; thou who canst rule they people with an iron hand. How long wilt thou bow the knee to any man?"

The princess' teeth showed white between her red ripe lips, but it was not a smile. "I think," she said softly, "I think it is time that Prester John made his third wish!"

Prester John strained his chest against the armor, and held the breath for so long that his head swung with dizziness. He blew it out and the red thick hair of his mustache fluttered.

"Princess," he said doggedly, "I ask thy leave to take my galley and go."

"*Ah!*" The princess' hand flew to her heart, and found there the hilt of her dagger. "Ah—" she said more softly.

"Exactly," Prester John agreed. "We are two strong people, thou and I—and my princess keeps her promises."

The princess' face had the white coldness of marble, of the alabaster altar against which Prester John had fought and almost died. Her nostrils swelled and still the white shine of her teeth came from between her red lips.

When she spoke, it was coldly, with a flat venom that pierced like a serpent's tooth, and Prester John felt the trembling of Bourtai, crouching behind him.

"So far as is the scope of my power," said the princess softly, "and within the limits of Turgohl, I gave my promise that thou shouldst have thy wishes. Thou hast permission to go."

"With my galley, princess, and the riches, of course."

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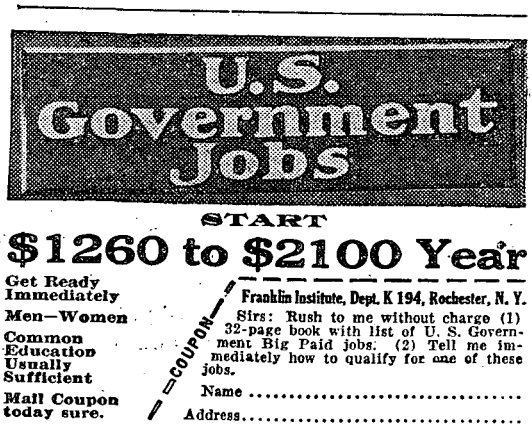
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"With thy galley, Prester John, and the riches."

Prester John bent stiffly to a knee. "I do now, princess, what I have never done before. I kneel to a woman. Let the memory prove to you my heart!"

The princess made a strangled sound, and the knuckles of the hand that clutched the dagger hilt were white, bone-white.

"Thou hast my permission to go!"

PRESTER JOHN lurched to his feet and turned away. As he walked his pace quickened, and he swung in the eternal rhythm of men who march. The sword swung a little at his side, and its clanking rang softly to the vault of the temple. His eyes bored into the darkness of the night, and he could see the far glitter of the stars on Baikul. At his side, skittering, dancing sideways, piping his thin protests up at Prester John, danced Bourtai in his gown of gold, half angry and wholly fearful.

"Thou art a fool, Prester John," he said. "Thou wilt never reach thy galley, or if thou dost, wilt never sail from this harbor with thy riches. Thou art a fool, Prester John. And alas, I am thy fool, for I must go with thee—else feel the rope of that waspish princess round my throat."

The galley was the largest in the harbor and through the night slaves carried gold aboard. Bourtai stood chuckling and shivering in alternate hope and fear beside Prester John and watched the riches, the brocades and silk and cloth of gold, the gems and spices and rich furs.

"Nay, sire," he whispered, "perhaps thou wert right. I will tell thee tomorrow when we are safe away. For surely the princess is a sweet, soft thing to gaze upon, but steel is her soul. She would rule thee or break thee, sire."

Prester John rumbled a throaty laugh as his eyes sought the far horizon of Baikul Sea. "Still I keep my rank in thy eyes, eh, Monkey-face? Still am I thy sire?"

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"Still and always, sire," Bourtai said fervently.

Prester John grunted and shouted an order to the slaves. The Hour of the Dog was past, and it was only a brief while more to the Hour of the Ox. He had wrested great riches from Turgohl, Kassar had been avenged, and some small part of his pledge to Christos had been fulfilled. Prester John touched briefly the bit of the True Cross about his throat.

"A hundred thousand, Christos," he muttered, "and they shall believe, as I believe, no matter what throats must be slit."

He bent down and whispered to Bourtai. "We will fool this cold princess, apeling," he whispered. "She will expect us to linger for the last peppercorn, the last cubit of silk. Already there is an emperor's ransom aboard. Get below and get the slaves to their oars. When I give the signal, have them give way with a will! For twixt thee and me, small twisted ape, I do not trust this princess of ours overmuch. Listen, I will stamp twice upon the deck."

Bourtai scampered below, and the shrillness of his voice echoed up to Prester John upon the deck. Cautiously he moved along, and twice his sword flashed up and down, so that only one more rope bound them to the shore. The ship trembled slightly under his feet, and he frowned. Strange that a galley of this bulk should tremble for so slight a cause! He hurried toward the only other rope. A chain of slaves, bowed beneath their loads, was approaching, but Prester John did not delay. Once more his sword rose and fell, and he stamped twice upon the wooden deck.

Once more, it seemed to him, the galley trembled, strangely insubstantial under his heel, but perhaps it was the lash of the oars all taking hold at once. Perhaps—Prester John hurried to the steering oar and, with a mighty heave of his shoulder, settled it into its socket. The sun's golden rim lifted above the Vola-

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poi hills and sent a shaft of light to kindle anew the fire in his hair. The flame wind moaned and was still. Prester John threw back his great head and hurled his laughter at the heavens. He was away, away—with riches under the hatches and the far, blue seas ahead. Bourtai cackled at his side, and the freshness of salt wind was in Prester John's nostrils. For a heavily loaded galley his ship rode strangely high in the water. It bobbled with each passing wave, but it held its course true under Prester John's grip upon the oar.

"Thou callest me a fool, Monkey-face," Prester John jeered.

"Nay, sire, I wronged thee. Thou art as great as thy magic."

"No, man," quoth Prester John, "is greater than his magic." He began to sing, and time skipped by and the Hour of the Ox drew near, the hour when his rule would end. There was blue sea all about them, and the shores of Turgohl were dim blue behind them. Only the faint lift of a purple island ahead broke the circuit of sky and sea.

"How think you, Bourtai, that I used my one day of rule?" Prester John asked presently. "When the sands of this glass have run it will end."

"Ah, well, sire! Well!" Bourtai lolled on a rich rug spread upon the deck, yet he seemed hunched and uncomfortable. "I shall watch these last sands run out and glory in them. Thou hast been great."

PRESTER JOHN felt some uneasiness as he saw the last sands dimple in their center and slide more swiftly, it seemed, through the small neck of the hourglass. He would feel that uneasiness until the sands had truly run out. He glanced down at Bourtai, and there was no comfort there, for all the small wizard's reassurance.

"The princess was generous," Prester John said slowly, "it could not be considered that we robbed her, for we earned what she gave us. Think you so, Bourtai?"

Bourtai flung back his head until his scrawny neck was stretched. "How could it be robbery, sire?" he cackled. "Besides, she hath not thought away the things she gave! That I take as proof self-evident. Sire, the last of the sands trickle through."

Prester John's eyes riveted on the hourglass. His chest swelled. It was almost over, this day of his rule, and it had been good, good. He was fabulously rich and free—there remained his vow, of course, but that could wait. A few grains of sand lingered, then they slid through. The galley lifted more sluggishly on the waves, and—

Prester John closed his eyes in relief. The last of the sands had run out. His day of rule was over, and—Bourtai uttered a strangled cry and Prester John opened his eyes. He swore a tearing oath and stared about him. He rubbed his eyes and stared again. Where was the rich-laden galley and the splashing oars? Where was the slave crew and the gallant mast? This boat in which he rode was no more than a leaking cockleshell, borne along by the currents of Baikul, and each moment sinking lower in the blue waters!

"Christos!" whispered Prester John. "I will fulfill my vow!"

Bourtai forced out a voice that strangled with rage. "I was looking right at it and it vanished, like a snap of the fingers, like a jewel. By Ahriman, *the princess has thought away her gift!*"

"What?" whispered Prester John. "What say you?"

"The princess has thought away her riches and her galley, thou fool, like any other wizard of Turgohl!"

Prester John stared into Bortai's glittering, angry eyes through a long moment, then he threw back his head and

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bellowed his laughter at the empty vault of the heavens.

"What said the prophecy, Bourtai? That I should rule for one day and thereafter there would be only one wizard left behind? The wizard is left behind—our little princess! And her magic is subtle; oh, quite as subtle as thine! For you see, we wanted to believe in this galley she conjured up for us, and in the riches with which she heaped us. Aye, aye, there is a princess for you. For you, but not for me! Thank Christos, there are leagues of sea 'twixt here and us."

"Thou art a fool!" Bourtai snapped.

"What, 'sire' no longer?" Prester John controlled his laughter with an effort. "Why, we have a boat of sorts, small twisted wizard with the soul of a mouse. There is an island ahead, and beyond are other lands and riches—but, I hope, no more princesses. By Ahriman, by Mithra and by Christos, it was well done, princess. My helmet is off to you!"

He lifted his hand to his fiery head, and a ludicrous look came across his face. He stared then and found he was naked, with only his sword and his bow and his quiver strapped about him—and his great thundering laughter rolled out anew.

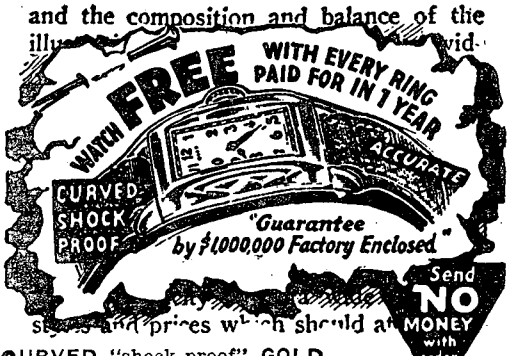
"By all the gods," he gasped, "she hath . . . she hath left us only our skins!"

The steering oar hung lax in his hand while his laughter rolled, and presently a sour grin touched the face of Bourtai.

"Thou art a fool, Prester John," Bourtai grumbled, "but a gay, brave fool—and, is it Christos you swear by? By Christos, she hath left me you, and you to me. And may you share the joy of it!" Then he cackled, and the thin sound blended with the thunder of Prester John's laughter and they drifted on, laughing, in a leaking little cockleshell upon the breast of blue Baikul toward an island purple with promise in the sun.

THE END.

and the composition and balance of the illu... vid...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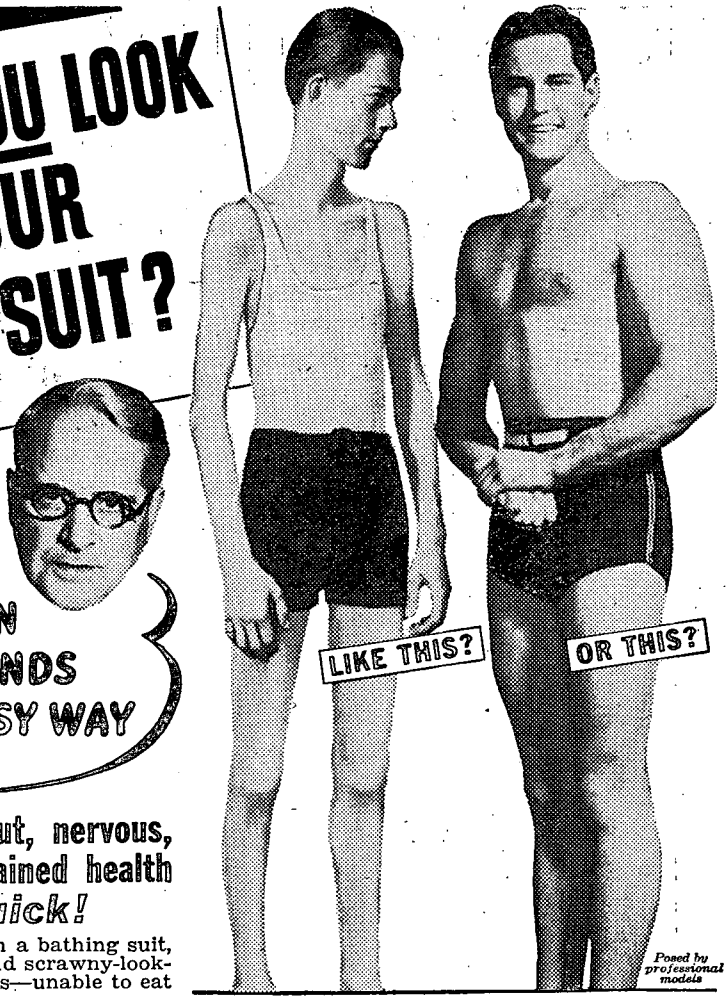

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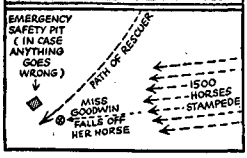

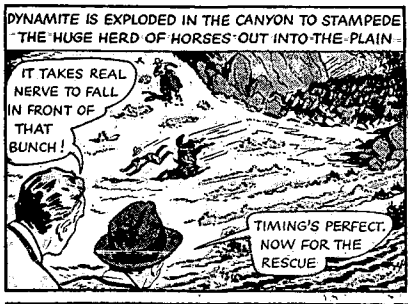
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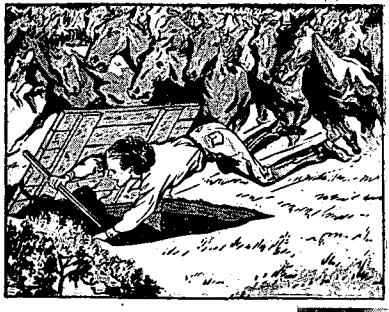

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